



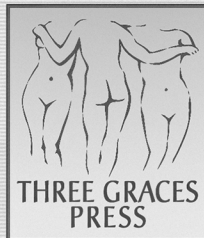
**crash
gordon** & the
illuminati underground

ALSO BY DEREK SWANNSON

Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg

Crash Gordon and the Revelations from Big Sur

The Snowden Avalanche



New York



CRASH GORDON

and the Illuminati Underground

D E R E K  S W A N N S O N

Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground is a work of fiction. When the names of 'real' places, corporations, institutions, secret societies, and public figures are projected onto *Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground's* fictional landscape, they are used fictitiously. All other names, characters, locales, and events are products of the author's imagination or, at best, scribbled missives from the collective unconscious. Any apparent similarity to actual persons, living or dead (or otherwise occupied) is not intended by the author and is purely a matter of the intricate workings of chance and synchronicity, or—as some might call it—fate. (Besides...what harm can come from a little fiction, when the facts are so much more appalling?)

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for my three graces

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RISE LIKE LIONS AFTER SLUMBER
IN UNVANQUISHABLE NUMBER,
SHAKE YOUR CHAINS TO EARTH LIKE DEW
WHICH IN SLEEP HAD FALLEN ON YOU—
YE ARE MANY—THEY ARE FEW

—PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

WHEN EXPOSING A CRIME IS TREATED
AS COMMITTING A CRIME, YOU ARE
BEING RULED BY CRIMINALS.

—ANONYMOUS

THE WORLD OF DEW
IS A WORLD OF DEW, AND YET
AND YET...

—KOBAYASHI ISSA

PROLOGUE

A CONVERSATION WITH YALDABAOTH

To: **Jeb Beezos** <jbeezos@glamazon.com>

From: Yaldabaoth <yaldabaoth@archonsrus.com>

Pesky Authors

January 11, 2015 at 9:03 AM

Beezos, my man!

Haven't heard from you in a while. Call me on your goofy Flame Phone when you get a chance. We have business to discuss.

Yr old Nobodaddy,
Yaldabaoth

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

“Hey Big Y! What’s up?”

“Jay-B.... You alone? We need to talk.”

"I'm in my office. Go for it."

"Okay! Great! So here's the deal: I noticed one of the authors in your Kindling Direct Publishing program has been writing books that veer a little too close to the truth about our, uhm... *enterprise*. Guy's name is Derek Swannson."

"Never heard of him."

"Yeah, well, somehow this guy has got our number. He started out with a premise from Aldous Huxley—'*Maybe this world is some other planet's hell*'—and he's just been rolling with it. He has three books out now: two fat ones and a skinny one called *The Snowden Avalanche*—all packed with details about how our team operates. He's giving away trade secrets, man!"

"Yaldabaoth, calm down. If the guy's in KDP, he can't be selling many books. And he sure as hell isn't making a living at it."

"How can you be sure?"

"It's all about the numbers. We have three-quarters of a million independent authors in Kindling Direct now. They're all vying for scraps of attention from a dwindling and increasingly distracted reading public. The exponentially increasing density of their collective books is like a star collapsing. It's on the verge of becoming a black hole. Tons of money flows in, but almost nothing goes back out to the individual authors. Most don't even make enough to pay for the coffee they drink while they're writing."

"This guy's different. He's getting noticed. He's been racking up five-star reviews from those meddlers in the Invisible College."

"So what? We can offset that with a bunch of negative reviews from spiteful brainwashed morons here on Earth. That'll drive away any new readers. *Screw the Invisible College!*"

"Goddam advocates for mankind... always getting in our way."

"If you want, I can put the CIA on this Swannson guy's case. Their interns love doing stuff like that. The bad reviews they come up with can be hilarious. It's good practice for the Operation Mockingbird stuff they'll be doing later. I heard they

even had Anderson Cooper doing it during *his* internship at Langley, way back when.”

“We already tried that. I had a retired COINTELPRO agent trash Swannson’s first book. Then I sent a legion of scolding old church ladies to give his other books one-star reviews. Still, he persists.”

“Sounds like he’s holding a grudge. What the hell did your guys do to him?”

“Nothing much. He’s just constantly broke, in poor health, and most of his relationships are toxic—same as it is for most people. My Archons barely touched him. But he hasn’t had *your* sweet ride, that’s for sure.”

“Hey, I didn’t appreciate the kidney stones. Or the half-billion-dollar write-down we had to take in the fourth quarter.”

“Don’t blame that on me. Learn to stay hydrated, you dipshit—and take my advice when I tell you something won’t fly. Man, I can’t believe you’d even dare complain to me about that. Name me one other CEO who’s become one of the five richest men in the world by running a company that’s only lost money for twenty years straight.”

“You know our endgame. It’s all about market share. I don’t have to explain it to you.”

“Right. Warehouses on every continent full of drones and robots and underpaid wage slaves... veritable Noah’s Arks filled to the rafters with every crap consumable and junk product the world has to offer... while Glamazon Web Services builds out cloud-based data storage and computing networks for everyone from Netflix to NASA to our Dark Brothers in the CIA.”

“Don’t forget the Glazelle Project.”

“Right—along with monopoly pricing power once our weaker competitors are eliminated. It’s a vision that still thrills me with its potential for global tyranny. We’re positioning Glamazon to become the most oppressive corporate Leviathan the world has ever seen.”

"Yeah, it's a good thing we've got going here, for sure."

"So let's not screw it up."

"I'm with you, Y, but how could one lousy, no-name writer possibly screw things up for us? I mean, seriously... I just don't see it happening."

"*Really?* Because, right now, I see Derek Swannson as a major threat. The Powers of Light are using that little punk as a Herald."

"Does he know?"

"So far, he hasn't a clue. But unlike most people, he's willing to speak the truth. And the truth can be dangerous to us. As one of his characters explained it in his last book: *'If the truth can be put out there in a way that everybody understands, it'll be believed...'*"

"Truth doesn't matter. What's he gonna do, get people to protest in the streets? Organize an *Occupy Glamazon* movement? There's no way. We're too far along to be turned back now."

"Intent is all that matters. Any one life can change everything. You, of all people, should know that. It's the Butterfly Effect writ large. Here—let me read you a passage from his first book, *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg*."

"That's his title? What is it, some sort of *Harry Potter* parody?"

"Hardly. Just listen. This is a CIA black-ops bagman named Lloyd Marrsden explaining the concept of egregores to a carload of teenagers on a road trip to the Esalen Institute back in 1983."

"Wait—he *knows* about egregores?"

"Apparently."

"*Shit!* So this is serious...."

"I *told* you. Now listen. Here's what he wrote: *'Let's think for a moment about how the egregores of corporations operate, since the Reagan administration seems so determined to hand our country over to them.... It's not much of an exaggeration to say that corporations are immortal soulless entities that take as much as they can and give nothing in return. Their primary goal is to keep increasing productivity and earnings in an all-devouring, endless cycle. Corporate*

egregores exploit their workers, pollute the environment, and turn vast quantities of the world's irreplaceable natural resources into disposable junk products, all just to show a quarterly profit. They steal from the poor and give to the rich, creating enormous concentrations of wealth in the hands of just a few thousand elitist assholes. If Reagan and Bush get their way and all that money and power isn't redistributed—via a system of fair taxes and the checks and balances built into our Constitution—then America's liberal, democratic society will soon be looking a lot more like a corporate-sponsored fascist police state. And that will be because, quite simply, the egregores of unchecked capitalism tend to penalize those who would better the lot of humanity, while at the same time rewarding the relatively few unbridled sociopaths who take advantage of anyone and anything that they can."

"Okay, I'll admit that sounds bad. But *still*—I don't see how it's a major problem."

"That's just one paragraph in a 600-page book, and there's another 750 pages in his other two books. The cumulative effect of reading all those pages, whether intended or not, is *gnosis*. The books carry a plasmate—living information that can travel up the optic nerve of a human being into the pineal body, where it replicates itself into its active form by using the reader's brain as a female host."

"Gross."

"I'm with you, J. It's beyond disgusting. After the plasmate cross-bonds with people, they gain access to an internal source of liberating spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*, that makes them invulnerable to the mass mind control technology we've been deploying in our covert war on human consciousness. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how *that* will screw up our plans."

"I hate those goddam plasmates."

"Me too. But the books are already out there. They're being read."

"So let's kick this guy out of Glamazon's publishing program. Hit him with some bullshit copyright violation charges or something."

"That would only make the situation worse. Derek Swannson is the sort of anti-establishment type who might decide to release his books for free everywhere, all at once. Or he might take his grievances public and initiate a Kickstarter campaign to get his books into public libraries—and then where would we be? Libraries are the last impregnable bastions of the Invisible College."

"They're on their way out."

"So you say, but I disagree."

"Libraries are funded by taxpayers. It won't be hard to shut 'em down once we've finished transferring all the assets from middle-class property owners to people like us—the eighty men and women who control over half the world's wealth."

"I'm not people, in case you forgot. I'm Lord of the Archons, Ruler of the Kingdom of the Air, Overseer of All Souls on Earth."

"Okay. Sorry. *I know that.* I misspoke."

"I'm omniscient and you're not. I told you the Flame Phone would bomb, didn't I?"

"It's still Day One, the way I see it...."

"That half-billion-dollar write-down will be looking like chump change if you don't admit defeat soon. You'll never catch up to Apple."

"We'll see. They don't have Steve Jobs anymore. Nice goin' with the pancreatic cancer, by the way."

"It pained me to do it. Steve had no problem exploiting Asian labor markets, but he was determined to make Apple products safe from hacking—and you know we can't have that."

"So why not just give this Swannson guy cancer, like Saint Steve? Remember how Steve used to say that good design would make people shit their pants? Loved that. Classy guy. He washed his feet in the toilet...."

"That's rich, coming from a man whose biological father was an alcoholic circus unicyclist. And don't pretend I don't know

about what you get up to in the shower when Mrs. Beezos isn't home. Now, as for Derek Swannson... death isn't the answer. His books will live on. What we need to do is destroy his reputation while he's still living."

"You mean, like, with a sex scandal or something? Should I put in a call to Lindsay Lohan? Or how about one of the Lardassians? The mother, maybe... she'd *really* do a number on him. She totally destroyed Goose Bender. He's got tits now."

"I'm thinking of something more subtle. We need to get him to recant—to stop telling the truth. I'm putting this to you as a personal challenge: I want you to convince Derek Swannson that he's wrong about this world being '*some other planet's hell*'."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that, when you and I both know it's true?"

"It might seem counterintuitive, but I want you to turn him into a celebrated author. I know you can do it with just a few tweaks of Glamazon's affinity marketing algorithms."

"Yeah, but won't that get him a shit-ton of new readers?"

"In the short-term, yes. But I'm taking the long view. Success has led to the downfall of as many men as failure—and we already know this one can handle failure. From what I've observed, the worse things get for this one, the more he writes. So let's see how his writing fares under an onslaught of serious money and acclaim."

"Wouldn't a heroin overdose work better?"

"He's not the type. I really see this as our best option. Smothering Derek Swannson with the rewards of Jesus-fueled American capitalism will neutralize his dissent. If you can get him to renounce his views that Archons are meddling in human affairs and corporations like Glamazon are bent on world domination, the plasmate in his books will wither and die from the virus of hypocrisy—and his loyal readers will turn away in disgust. Sound good?"

"So, essentially, you're asking me to use Glamazon to help this guy distribute polemics against Glamazon."

"It's about to get even more personal than that. The novel that Derek Swannson is working on now is called *The Book of Beezos*. It's an inverted re-telling of the Book of Job, in which a metafictional Derek Swannson appeals to the better nature of a metafictional Jeb Beezos for help against Jeb Beezos."

"You're kidding...."

"I wish. It's a wilderness of mirrors with this guy."

"And if I say *No*?"

"*Jay-B*, be serious... there's *no way* you could ever say no to me. You have too much to lose. Besides, all I'm asking is for you to put our man into a quandary that's similar to your own. It shouldn't be hard. You've won a lot of lotteries in life, *thanks to me*. Now you can pay it forward. Just give Derek Swannson a taste of what you've always had. Get him to admit that heaven can be found on Earth. That'll be enough to satisfy the terms of our wager."

"Hold on... it's a wager now?"

"If you succeed, you'll be richly rewarded. If you fail, you'll experience a rather significant loss. So *yes*, it's a wager. Proceed as if the afterlife dispensation of your very soul is at stake—because it is."

"Oh, that's just great. Way to light a fire under my ass, you spooky old bastard. I guess this means I'll have to cancel my trip to California to work on the Flame Phone update this week."

"Like I said, give up on the Flame Phone. This will be a much more productive use of your time. I'm omniscient, remember? Did I, or did I not, tell you the CIA was going to hand you that 600 million dollar contract? And now you've gone and pissed it all away on the Flame Phone, which I advised against."

"Okay, *okay*... do you always have to rub my nose in it? *Sheesh*."



MORRO BAY

**What Orwell feared were those who would ban books.
What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to
ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.**

—Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

WAKING UP TO A WORMY GIRL

Around 7 A.M. I wake to the smell of something burning. I bolt out of bed to find Justine the Screaming Eel Skin Queen (a.k.a. Wormy Girl) sitting in my living room on my scuffed-up leather couch. She's wearing a red square dance petticoat over red-and-white striped stockings and a cobalt blue velvet bustier with a broken shoulder strap held in place by a ducky-headed safety pin. Justine has used the remote to turn on my flat-screen TV, keeping the volume low. She's watching an old *Captain Kangaroo* clip, courtesy of UTube, while smoking a bent White Owl cigar.

She can be eccentric that way when she's off her meds.

"Someone's looking patriotic this morning..." I say as I rub the sleep-crud from my eyes. I get no response.

Justine was my older brother's live-in girlfriend for a couple of years, some twenty or thirty years back. I've sort of inherited her—in a companionable, non-sexual way—much like someone else might inherit an irascible cockatoo from a dead spinster aunt. My brother asked me to look in on Justine every now and then, since she lives only twenty miles up the coast from my place in Morro Bay. He can't very well do it himself, living on the opposite coast in New York. Skype doesn't cut it with Justine. You have to meet her face to face, in the flesh, to gauge whether or not the lithium is working.

In the beginning, I made the trips to Justine's wine and cheese shop in Cambria out of a sense of brotherly obligation, but we soon became friends. Justine says I remind her of my brother when she was living with him—only I'm less aloof. I take that as a compliment. My brother, Crash, has never been anyone's idea of a social butterfly. He might have been trying to overcompensate for that during his mid-twenties by dating his exact opposite.

Around the time Justine hooked up with Crash, in 1990 or '91, she was a gregarious Hollywood socialite, one of the few people on this planet who got along well with the reclusive—and second-degree-murderous—Phil Spector. (She was Phil's favorite music studio assistant during the relatively quiet period between his famous Wall of Sound days and the subsequent infamy that followed him after the shooting death of Lana Clarkson at his home in Alhambra.) Warren Zevon—of “Werewolves of London” fame—often called Justine late at night to bum rides home from her after his L.A. concerts when he'd had too much to drink. (Warren was almost always having too much to drink in those days—and Justine, on a sobriety kick, usually obliged as his late-night chauffeur.) As a teenage nymphet, Justine had also supposedly inspired at least three songs by her friends in The Knack, including their annoying 1979 hit, “My Sharona”—although Crash advised me to remain skeptical of that last claim, as Justine has always been prone to fits of exaggeration that go along with the manic side of her manic-depression.

Justine is past fifty now and no longer svelte (the lithium has made her ass too fat to squeeze into her namesake eel skin pants), but she's still glamorous in her way, with a Susan Sontag-ish skunk tail streak of white running through her otherwise jet-black hair, and a Katharine Hepburn upper crust Connecticut clip to her voice that I never grow tired of listening to.

“Don't you just love it when Mister Moose drops all those ping-pong balls on Captain Kangaroo's feeble old skull?” she asks me between puffs on her cigar as that very scenario plays out on the television in front of us.

Still wearing nothing but the cotton boxers I was sleeping in, I sit down on the couch next to Justine and take her hand in mine. “Feeling wormy again?” I ask, using her codeword for the bipolar blues.

“Your sliding glass door was unlocked, so I decided to let myself in.” She smirks at me with a trembling lower lip. “Did I ever tell you how I got the name Wormy Girl?”

“No, I don’t think you did.”

“There was a butcher shop near our house when I was growing up in Pacific Palisades. My mother used to take me there when she went to buy our meat. The butcher was fat and friendly, with a very red face. And bald—*oh so bald*—with big red pointy ears. He looked like Satan, now that I think about it, but I liked him.”

I feel her squeeze my hand before she continues: “Well, one day, this butcher came out from behind the counter in his blood-soaked leather apron and he asked my mother if I’d ever dined on steak tartare. He waved a bloody hunk of beef in my face, as if to frighten me with it. But I just stuck out my little tongue and gobbled it right up. I was maybe seven at the time. I discovered I had a taste for raw flesh. The butcher was delighted. And from that day on, whenever we visited his shop, he picked out some choice bit of bloody meat for me and rolled it into a ball—and then he plopped it in my mouth. He made a real show of it, telling everyone in the store that I was his best customer.”

“Nice guy...” I say.

“Well, yes and no,” says Justine, tamping the ash from her cigar into a plastic Dora the Explorer mug she’s brought along with her. “That butcher’s place wasn’t the cleanest. And one day he gave me a piece of meat that wasn’t exactly kosher. I figured that out after my pert little *derrière* exploded with a *très* stinky bout of diarrhea. When I went to wipe myself down there, I found a whole slew of tiny white worms on the toilet paper.” Here, she flares her shapely nostrils and makes a moue. “And when I blew on the worms, they stood up and danced.”

“Gross!” I exclaim, covering my brow with my free hand as I recoil, thinking of all the hellish humiliations that go along with inhabiting a human body. Shit and piss, blood and spit, vomit and post-nasal drip... we excrete that stuff like a slime trail through our days on Earth, whether we like it or not.

“It’s an experience I would’ve preferred to skip,” Justine admits.

“Why’d you blow on the worms?”

“Well, I was a very curious child, if you must know. Later, I showed the worms to my mother. *That* went over about as well as you might imagine. But after she finished shrieking, she got on the phone to a pharmacist—or perhaps the local horse doctor—and she found some de-worming pills that took care of the problem.”

I’m laughing along with her at that point.

“Years ago, when I first told that story to your brother, I’d just smashed a lamp over his head the night before during one of my... *lapses*. Telling the story was my way of apologizing to him. He forgave me, as he always did. And he decided, in that magnificent brain of his, that whenever I was being a bad girl and not taking my medicine, he’d refer to me as Wormy Girl as a gentle way of reminding me that sometimes—perhaps not always, but *sometimes*—pharmacological intervention is a necessity.”

“Did it work?” I ask her.

“Well, I didn’t smash any more lamps over his head, if that’s what you’re asking. When your brother and I finally decided to part ways so he could move to Seattle, I took a handful of Valium and spent the afternoon pelting him with campfire marshmallows.”

“Much softer than a lamp.”

“That’s what I thought. Although when he zinged one back at me and caught me right between the eyes, it stung like crazy.”

“Crash always had good aim.”

“I’ll say... *golly*.” Justine pats my knee and stands up from the couch. “Well, just talking about this has already made me feel better. Crash was right. I’m going back on the lithium.”

“I didn’t know you were off it.”

“For an entire month now. Pure folly. When I woke up this morning, I wanted to kill myself.”

“Don’t kill yourself, Justine. I’d miss you too much.”

“Don’t worry... I won’t. Speaking of follies, how’s your new book selling? Have you checked recently?”

Justine is referring to my latest novel, *The Snowden Avalanche*, which was published only a few months ago. She’s been around me long enough to know that whenever I have a new book out I tend to obsess over its Glamazon rankings.

“I haven’t looked in a while...” I say, trying to play it cool. But that’s a lie. I checked the ranking last night (#14,523), right before I went to sleep.

“Well, what’re you waiting for?” Justine walks over to my desk and fingers the start button on my 27-inch iMac. The iconic Mac start-up sound—like a gong electronically flushed through a sonic boom—resonates throughout my modest home.

I live on a steep hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean and Morro Rock—a huge, shore-hugging volcanic plug that’s taller than the Great Pyramid of Giza, but not as symmetrical. My father built the small Mid-Century Modern house I now inhabit. Back in the 1960s and 70s our family used it as a second home. Later, it produced income as a vacation rental. It has black stucco exterior walls, a single-pitch shed roof, a Mandarin red lacquered front door, and an interior design scheme that makes liberal use of angular Danish Modern furniture and fifties-era Formica floors and countertops. My father had inherited a lumberyard and hardware store from *his* father in Kingsburg, California, so construction costs must have been cheap, but he’d skimmed on materials, anyway. The place is falling apart and I’m constantly repairing things.

I never met my father. He died in 1979, right before I was born. Crashed his Cessna into the living room of our house in Kingsburg. Suicide, or just an insanely stupid accident, no one could say for sure.

My brother was thirteen at the time. He witnessed the plane crash as it was happening. What he saw in the living room that day caused him to develop narcolepsy as a sort of post-traumatic stress disorder. Any loud noise, or too much excitement, and he would keel over in a sudden sleep—an instant paralysis of dreaming. Hence his high school nickname, Crash, which stuck. His real name is Gordon. I call him *Crash Gordon* in my books. He got over the narcolepsy after spending six years or so in a resident scholar program at the Esalen Institute, just up the road in Big Sur. Crash then spent another six years living in Seattle, and now he's a semi-famous neo-conceptual artist with a big apartment overlooking Bryant Park in New York City.

He doesn't fall down anymore.

The house in Morro Bay had been sold prior to my father's death, but the buyer defaulted on the loan held by the lumberyard's private financing division, so it became my mother's property again after the attorneys sorted everything out. She didn't know what to do with it. She tried renting it out, but a series of bad tenants left it in a shabby state of disrepair. Then, in 2009, when I was foundering in the wake of an amicable but weirdly devastating divorce, my mother said I could live in the Morro Bay house for \$400 a month if I promised to fix it up.

Her timing couldn't have been better. I'd just turned thirty and the wheels had come off. My lovely young wife, Julie, had decided money was more important than love, so she'd ditched me and moved in with a pot-bellied old man with a stringy gray ponytail and freakishly white porcelain veneer teeth. The source of the old guy's mysterious allure seemed to be the trendy jewelry store he owned in the Gaslamp Quarter. I recognized that I was probably better off not being the spousal scapegoat for Julie's frequent rages. She'd been exhibiting all the classic symptoms of a borderline personality disorder during the last few years of our marriage. It was like living with the human equivalent of a Siamese fighting fish. Still, I couldn't stop myself from wallowing in misery every time I thought about her giving up her tight little cooze to that bloated geezer. What can I say? It seems I was attracted to mentally unstable women, just like my brother.

Here's a snapshot of my San Diego life, post-divorce: My seventies-era audiophile tube-amp stereo system was playing American Music Club's *Mercury* album in heavy rotation (some of the saddest songs known to man, in my expert opinion), along with the more sulky ballads of Nick Cave, This Mortal Coil, and Leonard Cohen. I was probably (almost certainly) drinking too much craft beer and Danish aquavit. And the poetry of Charles Bukowski was suddenly making far too much sense to me.

As for my career, I was an adept but underappreciated architect, going nowhere at a friend's small firm. The friend was actually kind of a jerk. He paid me less than market rate and took all the credit for my work. Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe all once worked together at the same architectural studio in Germany, but I had to get saddled with a scheming dickweed named Oren McChristophe boasting an Architectural Project Management degree from Chico State.

The way I saw it, I only had three things going for me: I could kick ass with AutoCAD, so freelancing would never be a problem; I enjoyed reading and writing novels as a low-cost way of passing the time; and I'd worked a series of construction jobs to pay for college and grad school, so I was handy with tools. With that particular skill set, the Morro Bay setup sounded like an ideal situation to me. By pulling back and keeping things simple, I could gain more personal freedom. So I packed all my stuff and headed up the coast in a rented U-Haul truck. That was over five years ago. I haven't found any reason to leave since.

"Oh, look—you're number 18,349!" Justine says, pointing at Glamazon's webpage for *The Snowden Avalanche* in an Oogle Zone browser. "Is that good?"

I try not to grimace. My Glamazon ranking is plummeting. "Eighteen-thousand means I've sold about ten books in the last twenty-four hours," I tell her. "The royalties will amount to around twenty-eight bucks. C'mon, I can buy you brunch...."

"Wait. Let's check your other books first." Justine clicks away with the wireless mouse. "Uh-oh. *Crash Gordon and the Revelations from Big Sur*, my favorite, is only at 692,388."

“One book sold in the last two weeks.”

“And *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg* is at 1,025,576.”

“One book in the last month.”

“Swannson, you’ll never get rich at this pace!” Justine scolds me. “Snap to it!”

“It’s kind of beyond my control...” I tell her.

The Snowden Avalanche had been Glamazon’s #1 Satire in America and Europe when it was listed as a free e-book for five days during a Kindling Select promo campaign at the start of the new year. Thousands of people had downloaded it. But now that it’s back at its regular price (\$3.99), sales have slowed to a trickle.

Maybe I’ve set the price too high. No one wants to pay for books or movies or music anymore. Why pay for creative work of any kind when the Internet offers such an abundance of porn and trivial infotainment for free?

Even my favorite poet, Czeslaw Milosz (*Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*; Glamazon Best Sellers Rank: #766,958 in Books), has a hard time competing for eyeballs in the land of xHamster, Fox News, *World of Warcraft*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. In terms of sheer raw entertainment value, *The Snowden Avalanche* doesn’t stand a chance against a porn ingénue experiencing an under-the-table orgasm while reading aloud from Supervert’s *Necrophilia Variations*. (Oogle it: 30 million+ views and counting... her name is Stoya.)

Such is the world we live in. If I knew how to do anything else that would make me feel relevant, I’d probably be doing it, but writing is the only activity that makes me think my life might matter, just a little, in our increasingly thuggish and anti-intellectual global society. Albert Camus said the purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself. So I keep cranking out books, doing what I can, even though there’s no real money in it.

HUEVOS, WAFFLES, AND A DOLLOP OF PORN

I take a quick shower. Then, smelling of fresh balsam pine soap, I drive Justine to the harbor in my classic 1962 Triumph TR3.

The Triumph already had over 190,000 miles on its odometer when I bought it—and I got it cheap—so don’t be too impressed. Like my house, it’s in constant need of repairs. So far, its restoration has done a great job of keeping me broke. But on the plus side, if you want to avail yourself of the charms of a certain class of young women, it’s a definite asset. Low-slung, silver-gray, with ox-blood red leather bucket seats and wire-spoked rims, the Triumph is a total babe magnet. My ex-showgirl girlfriend, Pam From Siam, absolutely loves it.

More about Pam later.

I leave the top down on the Triumph, even though it’s a bit chilly out. As we turn onto the Embarcadero, we see a fog bank sweeping in from the north, out past the old PG&E smokestacks by the shore. My guess is the fog will burn off in a few hours as the temperature warms up into the high sixties. That’s winter on the Central Coast for you—not bad, considering that my brother is about to be hit by a “polar vortex blizzard” that’s supposed to dump at least two feet of snow all across the East Coast. The Weather Channel, always prone to hyperbole, has been calling it a “meteorological bomb.”

Why Crash chooses to live in New York is beyond me, although I guess the art scene there has been good to him. He'd have to paint sunsets and seascapes if he wanted to make a living as an artist out here.

Fishing and tourism—that's what Morro Bay is all about. That, and slacking off. It's about as far from New York as you can get. Here, there's not much to do, so there's no pressure to get anything done. The end result is no worries... or at least very few.

Justine and I opt for brunch at Rosa's Shark Shack. Rosa's place really *is* a shack: weather-silvered cedar shingles for siding and zippered plastic sheeting for windows, with a big, ugly Douglas-fir deck out in back, hanging out over the harbor on old phone pole pilings encrusted with mussels and barnacles.

I ask the waitress to seat us at a picnic table out on the deck so Justine can smoke another White Owl. Even with the chill in the air, it's nice being outside. We sit there listening to the sloshing seawater and the mournful lowing of the foghorns. The air smells of salt and wave-churned sea muck, overlaid with a whiff of diesel. Everything feels muted. A squadron of pelicans glides through opaque mist far above us. Unseen sea lions bark, seemingly from miles away. Out on the harbor, the fishing boats rock and sway, ropes creaking as they stretch against their moorings, riggings clanking and pinging against metal masts, wood thudding against waterborne wood—all in that lovely, desolate way that's unique to seaside communities in the early morning.

"Time is as slippery as a new deck of playing cards," Justine says, apropos of nothing. "One minute you're dancing on tabletops to Guns N' Roses in the Viper Room, and the next you're some sad old cow selling Camembert and Chardonnay to pot-bellied tourists from Fresno as if your very life depends on it. Which it does—I couldn't abide being poor like you. Still, I miss the debaucheries of my youth. Don't you?"

"Your debaucheries sound like they were more fun than mine," I say.

“I’ll be right back,” she says, popping up again. “I want a newspaper. Order me the Belgian waffles—with strawberries and an extra dollop of whipped cream.”

When the waitress returns, I order the Belgian waffles for Justine and a breakfast burrito with green salsa for myself.

“You’re not dippin’ into the honeypot on that one, are you, Derek?” the waitress asks me as she tucks her order pad into the back pocket of her jeans. She’s one of those salty, seen-it-all types: fifty or sixty years old, arms like a trucker, orthopedic shoes, a bad perm—and a warm smile. We’re on a first name basis, even though I know next to nothing about her life outside the restaurant. Her name is Barb.

“We’re just friends,” I tell Barb as she repeatedly clicks her pen. There’s a red tattoo of Insane Clown Posse’s Hatchetman on her left bicep. She must be someone’s juggalo aunt. “There’s nothing sexy going on...” I swear to her.

“Good,” she says. “Because I remember when your brother used to come in here with that suicidal bitch. Anyone could tell she was making his life miserable.”

“Justine has some issues, but she has a good heart,” I say, feeling very protective of her at that moment.

“And she’s pretty—no use denying that—but I always thought he could’ve done better.”

By better, I wonder if Barb is thinking of herself. Five years ago, when we first met, Barb told me she’d had a bit of a crush on my brother when she was younger. It’s hard for me to imagine what she might have been like in her twenties. For all I know, she could have been a waifish little hippie chick, waiting tables just to pass the time until something better came along. Now here she is, some twenty-five years later, still waitressing. I doubt that Barb would have been as intellectually stimulating as Crash had found Justine. But steadier? Absolutely.

“Justine’s calmed down a lot since then,” I inform Barb. “She’s great company now, when she wants to be.”

“Good to know!” Barb says with a perky grin. “I’ll tell the cook to hold off on the strychnine in those waffles then.”

Maybe I’ve been underestimating Barb all along.

After she goes back inside, I sit alone under the Dos Equis beer umbrella listening to staticky music coming across the water from the fishing boats. One of the local dockworkers has tuned his portable radio to a distant Mexican station squawking out a sad narcocorrida. It’s about some loser in a mariachi band who was forever complaining that the actress Salma Hayek didn’t love him—even though the sum of his worldly possessions consisted of a cheap acoustic guitar, a leaky bicycle pump, and a rather fabulous lime green sombrero. He knew he needed major pesos to win Salma’s affection (at the time, she was married to François-Henri Pinault, the CEO of a twenty-four-billion-dollar multinational luxury conglomerate that owned Gucci, Balenciaga, and Yves Saint Laurent), so Señor Mariachi Superloverman started dealing crystal meth. Then the luckless *pendejo* ran afoul of the Sinaloa cartel and got his head lopped off with a greasy chainsaw. Now his bereft mariachi brothers sing Señor Superloverman’s tribute song in the eternal hope that someday Salma Hayek will hear it and be guilt-tripped into participating in a hot tub orgy with them. (*Salma, you’re older than you used to be / When Tarantino licked whiskey off your toes in From Dusk till Dawn / But you still look good in a bikini / And if you’ll sing a Jacuzzi narcocorrida for our brother / All five of us can get it on...* goes the chorus as flamboyantly melancholy Tijuana trumpets blat in the background.)

I picked up some Spanish while I was down in San Diego.

Justine returns holding the edges of a mid-January 2015 issue of *The National Enquirer* like she’s just used it to clean up a mound of kitten puke. She flops it on the table in front of me.

“Did you see this?” she asks me. On the front page, Bill Clinton’s face has been Photoshopped onto an aerial view of a tropical island paradise. He’s frowning like a disgruntled Muppet (maybe Gonzo trying to pass a 5-carat kidney stone). The main headline above Bill’s furrowed brow reads:

HILLARY'S PREZ BID IN RUINS

BILL CAUGHT IN TEEN SEX RING!

A subhead in a blazing red box below proclaims:

**SPY PHOTOS
CAPTURE CLINTON
ON BILLIONAIRE'S
'ORGY ISLAND'**

And the one I really like is down toward the bottom of the page next to a headshot of a sporty-looking blonde named Virginia Roberts Giuffre who's wearing a white mock turtleneck (emblematic of her purity, no doubt...):

**17-YEAR-OLD
SLAVE TELLS ALL:
'HE'S A SLEAZE DOG'**

I start cracking up.

"You think that's funny?" Justine asks me, outraged.

"I don't care who Clinton screws in private," I say. "I'm more interested in how the public's getting screwed by his handlers in the Deep State—the hidden state, the one we didn't elect—where a corrupt corporate oligarchy colludes with our out-of-control military-industrial-intelligence complex to come up with new ways of fucking us over every single day."

"But Clinton's taking 'Pervy Jaunts' on a 'Private Sex Jet—With A Bed!' Look—it says so right here...."

"Justine, there are plenty of rich and powerful scumbags who get away with sexually molesting children—just do some research on the Franklin Scandal, Jimmy Savile, Marc Dutroux, Marcial

Maciel, or the Finders Cult, if you don't believe me—but Bill Clinton isn't one of them. Did you even bother to read this article?"

"No. Not yet."

"Well, I'll tell you what it says. I ran across it on the Internet a few nights ago. Clinton didn't screw anyone on the 'sex jet.' He was just hitching a ride with Jeffrey Epstein, a billionaire 'sleaze dog' of the first order. Epstein is a big donor to Harvard and a convicted pedophile. He allegedly had three twelve-year-old French girls shipped to him on his birthday for erotic massage purposes. And Virginia Roberts here claims that Epstein forced her to have sex with Prince Andrew when she was seventeen—although she's in her thirties now and a mom to three kids."

"But why would Clinton fly around with someone like that, unless he was doing that stuff, too?"

"I don't know... maybe he just enjoys Epstein's company."

"Maybe he just wanted to get his rocks off with a tag-team of twelve-year-old French girls."

"I doubt it. Monica Lewinsky is more his type. He likes them older, with some extra padding. Here's a conversational tidbit for you: did you know that the Office of Independent Counsel spent over seventy million dollars investigating Bill Clinton? That's what it cost us, as taxpayers, to find out if he fudged some numbers in the Whitewater scandal and got a blowjob from a consenting adult in the Oval Office. But the 9/11 Commission was initially restricted to spending only three million on its investigation of the September 11th attacks. That's all the Bush administration wanted to pony up for it, after over a year of delays and stalling tactics. Eventually, the budget got pushed up to around fifteen million, give or take, but *still*—it shows you where their priorities were: they really wanted to find out about that blowjob. But about 9/11? Not so much."

"Monica Lewinsky's blowjob cost us seventy mil?"

"Indirectly, thanks to the media frenzy whipped up by Kenneth Starr and his Republican backers."

"*Criminy!* I would've done it for a lot less."

“And as a taxpayer, I would’ve been grateful to you. We live in a free market society—our public servants should only get blowjobs from the lowest competitive bidders while they’re in office, if taxpayers are picking up the tab. But we weren’t given that option.”

Justine cocks her head and says, “Maybe there should be a box you could check on the 1040EZ form: *‘Willing to have sex with a politician in lieu of this year’s tax payment...’*.”

“I’m sure that’d be a big hit with sexually indiscriminate taxpayers *and* members of Congress,” I say. “Career politicians like Bill Clinton need a lot of lovin’—more than most of us. We’re talkin’, like, oceans of it. I’m sure that a fuckhound like Clinton wouldn’t mind if every night was like the orgy scene in *Eyes Wide Shut*. That’s probably why he was allowed to rise to power in the first place: his handlers knew his sex addiction would make him easy to control. Whenever he was on the verge of doing something they didn’t like, they could just trot out the latest poontang scandal and bring him to heel.”

“So you think this is just being put out there to box around Bill?” Justine asks me.

“Or to derail Hillary’s presidential campaign.”

“Very insightful, Swannson. You surprise me sometimes.”

“I wrote about all this in *The Snowden Avalanche*. My theory is that all U.S. Presidents—at least since LBJ—have been corrupted and controlled by their Deep State handlers. Jimmy Carter might’ve been the only exception, but even with him, you can’t be too sure.”

“Well, he *did* tell that *Playboy* interviewer that he lusted after women in his heart, after all.”

“Not exactly *Eyes Wide Shut* material, is it?”

“No. And to be honest, I can’t see Carter scampering around violating French schoolgirls with his freckled peanut farmer penis. But maybe they had something else on him.”

“He had the Iranian Hostage Crisis hanging over his head. That was enough for the Reagan/Bush team to take him out.”

That’s something else I’d written about in my last book: how David Rockefeller and his irrepressible war criminal pal, Henry Kissinger, had coerced President Carter into reluctantly providing American medical care for the deposed Shah of Iran—an act that provoked the Iranians into retaliating by seizing the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. (According to the *New York Times*, when Carter finally caved in to Rockefeller’s demands, he asked, “What are you guys going to recommend that we do when they take our embassy and hold our people hostage?”) The hostage crisis had lingered like a black cloud over Carter during the 1980 Presidential election. If Carter had been able to negotiate an ‘October Surprise’ release of the 52 hostages in Tehran, he almost certainly would have been re-elected—but ex-CIA Director George H.W. Bush and his preppy mafia of intelligence operatives had treasonously sabotaged those negotiations (while sowing the seeds for the Iran-Contra affair), thus making sure that the hostages stayed put until Reagan’s first day in office.

“Politics is such a dirty business,” says Justine.

“It’s a messed-up world we live in—that’s for sure. ‘*Some other planet’s hell*,’ if you believe Aldous Huxley.”

“And why wouldn’t you?”

“There’s enough evidence—that’s for sure.” Justine has heard me go off on Huxley’s premise before, but I’m willing to unpack it again. “Everything’s turned inside out, upside down, and backwards from the way things ought to be: The middle-class is being taxed right out of existence so we can give subsidies to corporations that shield their profits from taxes offshore. Politicians whore themselves out to the highest bidders and get elected based on their willingness to legislate the will of the people right out of the legislative process. Big Pharma and health insurance companies do everything they can to prevent us from getting the healthcare we need, while steering us, instead, into insanely expensive medical regimes that cause harmful side effects and do a poor job of curing our ills. Lawyers and judges

pervert the rule of law to oppress the poor and let the rich get away with murder and mass thievery. Colleges deliberately promote obscure theories over real knowledge, while saddling students with crippling debt, turning potential free thinkers into overtaxed wage slaves. Meanwhile, U.S. foreign policy seems intent on destabilizing the Middle East and starting a new Cold War with Russia—we terrorize other countries to supposedly stop terrorism—while the National Security Agency spies on its own citizens, making the whole world more insecure in the process.”

“Listen to you, Noam Chomsky. You should go on a lecture tour.”

“That’d be way too depressing,” I say. “No one wants to hear about the reality we’re facing: Thanks to the Federal Reserve and the creeping financialization of the U.S. economy, everyone that can be bought has been bought. A rapacious oligarchy runs the world now. Their jacked-up version of global capitalism is entering a virulent and lethal endgame. And its intended victims are the 99 percent of the world’s people that have already been cheated out of half the world’s wealth.”

“There you go, spouting off like some Commie socialist again...” Justine jokes.

“Americans in the bottom 90 percent have already lost forty percent of their net worth since 2007,” I remind her. “And with the next pre-engineered ‘economic collapse’ it’ll get a lot worse.”

“Well, that’s a big ol’ bummer, for sure,” says Barb, returning to our table with a stack of Belgian waffles and my chubby, green-salsa-dripping breakfast burrito, “but before those greedy banksters steal all our marbles and turn California back into a desert, you can sit here and enjoy a nice breakfast with your friends.”

“Dig in, Swannson,” Justine says, raising a fork in her fist. “We may be living in Huxley’s hell, but at least the food’s good.”

“If it’s not poisoned,” I say for Barb’s benefit.

“We try to keep the pesticides and GMOs to a minimum around here,” Barb says with a wink, “but cholesterol’s a whole ‘nother story.”

"I saw on the cover of *Time* recently that cholesterol's not supposed to be so bad for you, after all," says Justine as she spears some of my scrambled eggs.

I'm starting to realize that Justine gets way too many of her opinions off the covers of magazines. She's making it easy for the mainstream media's relentless propaganda crew to do their job of steering public opinion.

"Can I get some ketchup?" she asks Barb.

"For your waffles?" Barb's expression flickers somewhere between exasperated and perplexed.

"For his eggs. They need ketchup."

"Oh. Sure... be right back."

"Maybe that whole 'Cholesterol is bad for you' meme was put out there so Big Pharma could get people hooked on their super-expensive, cholesterol-lowering statins," I suggest. "And now that the ugly long-term side effects from taking statins are showing up—and the drug companies that make them are getting sued—maybe it's time for the bad cholesterol meme to be retired."

"Not everything is a conspiracy, Swannson," Justine says, unconvinced. "Butter and eggs simply taste good, so they *must* be evil. Because this is hell, remember? Everything here is topsy-turvy. As you yourself put it in your first book: '*The things you want the most usually end up being bad for you. The sun gives you skin cancer, the tastiest foods make you fat, and love will break your heart.*'"

"Good memory," I say.

"I pride myself on that: a good memory and the ability to dance the Watusi in eel skin pants. Those two talents have taken me quite far in life."

"Here you go..." says Barb, returning to our table and thunking down a bottle of Heinz ketchup. "Will there be anything else?"

"Thanks, Barb," I say. "I think we're good for now."

"Just holler if you need me. I'll be inside." Away she goes.

"That waitress hates my guts," Justine observes, unperturbed.

STATE OF THE UNION UNDRESSED

“What’s screwed up is that most Americans had no problem with the Bush administration suckering us into a four-trillion-dollar war in the Middle East, but any random political sex scandal can still get us all riled up with moral indignation.”

Justine says in her defense: “Well, at least we can all agree that politicians going on ‘pervy jaunts’ in ‘private sex jets’ is just plain sick and wrong.”

“Oh sure. Sending in the Predator drones to bomb the crap out of people living near where Jesus grew up is A-okay, but we still think sex is bad, even though our culture is pretty much a non-stop porno freak show. It’s like the Roman Empire right before the Dark Ages, only with flat screens and fiberoptic cable.”

“It’s a feast for vulgarians out there, that’s for sure... thank God.”

“Everything on the magazine racks looks like porn to me these days. *Cosmopolitan*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Architectural Digest*—all of it. Especially *Architectural Digest*. Real estate porn is the worst.”

“Did you see that girl on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*?”

“The one pulling down on her bikini to show off her waxed cooch? She’s hot.”

“I recall a time when men had to rely on their vile imaginations.”

"I noticed Brad Pitt and Johnny Depp get put on plenty of covers for you ladies."

"True, but not with their pants down."

"You have to go on the Internet for that. Just do an Oogle search for 'celebrity wieners' and Brad Pitt's tiny todger can be yours to peruse, whenever the mood strikes."

"Which reminds me: Goose Bender has been having some trouble with his sex change operation, I gather. An Olympic gold medalist flouncing around in skirts like Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*... I find that sad."

"Isn't he close to seventy now? Seems a little old to be going transgender all of a sudden."

"Frankly, it sounds dangerous. But like you said, it's the culture. Our brains are being parboiled in porny distractions."

"No shit. Superficial sexuality and repressive desublimation have become the bread and circuses of our day: Pedophile-friendly pop moppets like Miley Cyrus twerking with demented teddy bears at the MTV Awards. Katy Perry doing her Whore of Babylon routine with whipped cream spewing from her tits. Beyoncé acting like a Project MONARCH-programmed sex slave with her alter personality, Sasha Fierce—"

"Cute little Justin Bieber pissing in mop buckets and screwing Brazilian hookers. Well-hung Don Draper's penile posturing on the *Mad Men* series. Sting's ten-hour-long orgasms—"

"Janet Jackson's 'wardrobe malfunction' at the Super Bowl. Ke\$ha telling people on talk shows about her 'haunted vagina'—"

"Goose Bender's sloe-eyed stepdaughter baring her enormous ass in the latest Prada ads—"

"I think he goes by Gander now, but yeah... what *is it* with all those Lardassian girls he's playing dad and twisted sister to, anyway? Not a month goes by without them being on the covers of at least three different magazines. And why should we care? It's not like they're talented—or even interesting. They're just famous for being famous. Did their parents make a Faustian pact

with the mainstream media moguls? Like, *You can say whatever you want about our family... just turn us into mega-rich celebrities.*”

“Almost all celebrities have that stench of Mephistopheles trailing behind them. Once they’ve prostituted themselves for fame, it seems they’re locked into it. There’s no getting out. They just have to do as they’re told.”

“Furthering the agenda of the oligarchs. They’re the human equivalent of circus poodles. Or trained seals.”

“At least they get to be rich.”

“Some of them. But that might not be such a great deal if you have to trade away your privacy and anything resembling real freedom.”

“The government has plans to steal that from us, anyway, if you read your own books.”

“Right. We’re becoming a nation of tax donkeys forced to live under constant surveillance in a crypto-fascist police state. Or words to that effect.”

“So many words....”

“The will of the people doesn’t count for shit anymore. We’re all Monica Lewinskys now, sucking the massive collective dick of the Deep State.”

“Where’s Deep Throat when you need him?”

“Jeb Beezos owns the *Washington Post* now. Woodward and Bernstein wouldn’t stand a chance of getting anything like the Watergate story published there today—unless it served the Deep State’s agenda. A covert whistleblower like Deep Throat would be hunted down like a rabid dog and locked away forever by the Feds for violating the Espionage Act.”

“I suppose they could still write a book.”

“Yeah—and get maybe a few thousand readers who would dismiss them as conspiracy theorists.”

“Oh now you’re just projecting.”

"I'm not. Glamazon and Oogle control the search algorithms that dictate which books get read in the world today. It's a soft fascism, this algorithm soup we're all soaking in. It's telling us what to think, say, feel, and do. Why should we trust profit-hungry corporations to work in our best interests, to preserve freedom of communication and expression, or even give us an honest accounting of their sales figures? Corporations are, by their very nature, amoral. We all saw how easy it was for Glamazon to negatively impact book sales during their war with Hachette. Two-thirds of all books sold online now go through Glamazon—and that figure is growing. Because of that, *discovery* has become the biggest problem in publishing. Glamazon has over eighteen million paperback titles for sale now—and they're adding around three thousand new titles to the Kindling store *every single day*—but the average American only reads six books a year. So if your book can't catch a good algo wave, it'll be left bobbing around in a sea of literature that no one's ever heard of."

"Poor, put-upon Swannson. You're hardly Job, you know...."

"True. At least people who write books like mine don't get shot or sent to prison here in America. We just don't get paid. Having no income in a rabidly capitalist society is disincentive enough for most potential disruptors of the status quo."

"You're just riddled with envy because you didn't write *Fifty Shades of Grey*."

"Of course I am. What a boon to humanity *that* was... I had no idea there were so many book-reading masochists out there who wanted to indulge their fantasies of submitting to a sociopathic CEO."

"Thanks to E.L. James, I expect to see an erect penis on the cover of *Bloomberg Businessweek* any day now."

"That won't be happening. The white male patriarchy will never allow it."

"Don't be so sure, Swannson. The day will come when Monica Lewinsky is avenged—and it's coming sooner than you think."

A PASSIVE HOUSE FOR A HORNY PODIATRIST

After breakfast, I drop off Justine next to her plum-colored Porsche back at my place. Then I drive thirty-three miles inland to a forested hill just outside of Creston, where a construction crew is framing up a passive house that I designed for my podiatrist.

I happen to be a Certified Passive House Consultant—the only one in San Luis Obispo County, so far as I know. I spend a lot of time with potential clients trying to explain why a passive house would be the best way for them to go.

Passive house construction is about five to ten percent more expensive than traditional construction upfront, but the savings from increased energy efficiencies more than make up for that extra cost over time. A passive house maintains a comfortable indoor temperature without active heating and cooling systems by creating an airtight building envelope that incorporates a system for exchanging interior and exterior air—usually via a high-efficiency energy recovery ventilator.

One of the first questions I always get asked is: “If the house is airtight, won’t we suffocate?”

I tell people they can always open a triple-glazed window if they’re feeling faint, but passive houses generally have *fresher* air circulating through them than drafty old regular houses, because

of the way their air exchange systems work. Still, the thought of owning an airtight house makes a lot of people freak out. Most opt for more traditional construction methods, along with more traditional architects. Which explains my failure to join the big boys in the winner's circle of the capitalist society sweepstakes.

Six months ago, I was running low on funds. I was taking on garage remodel projects, designing eco-friendly trailer homes on spec, and hitting my credit cards for cash advances to patch over the rough spots. My lack of spending power was crushing my sense of freedom. I felt like a man on a ledge, one step away from plummeting into serious debt. But my personal credit-vultures were about to be thwarted, thanks to my left foot.

I have fallen arches and the pain from walking around—on my left foot, in particular—had been getting so bad that I decided to consult a podiatrist. I picked a guy at random out of the Yellow Pages. Doctor Jeffrey Lindstrom had the best-looking ad, so I made an appointment with him.

Doc Lindstrom turned out to be an old guy with a weather-blasted face and thick, peppery silver hair with a matching goatee. He had his own private practice in San Luis Obispo—just him and a staff of five buxom Latina girls, whom he claimed to be training to become podiatrists, too. I found that kind of hard to believe at first, because they all looked super-fuckable, sashaying around in identical Chanel running shoes and tight little lime-green operating scrubs designed to show off their bangin' bodies. But every one of those girls proved to be savvy and articulate—and they'd all picked up the old man's soothing way with patients, a charming mix of deep intellectual confidence and genuine human warmth.

One of them was named Camila. After my initial consultation with the good doctor, Camila came in and escorted me down the hallway to a specialized foot X-raying machine. As she bent over to position my bare left foot on the machine's cold, glassy surface, I caught a glimpse of a lacy rose-red bra cupping her exquisitely rounded, dusky breasts. My groin lurched as she disappeared around the corner and the machine let out a warning

buzz to alert everyone that my toes were getting soaked in radiation. By the time Camila returned, I had a full-blown erection nosing down the left leg of my jeans like an inquisitive gopher.

“Bad news, sweetie...” Camila said. “You got a hairline fracture on the third metatarsal in your left foot.”

“How’d I do that?” I asked.

“Sometimes it just happens. You want my advice? Ditch those Romeo boots with the hard heels you came in on and buy yourself some running shoes.”

“Like yours?”

“You can’t afford mine, *papi*...” she said with a doe-eyed wink as she turned to lead me back down the hallway.

I found myself thinking that if Pam ever dumped me, I would gladly marry any one of Doc Lindstrom’s office assistants and let that lucky lady support me in my doddering old age with her thriving foot care clinic.

Back in the consulting room, Doc Lindstrom and I really hit it off. He asked me what line of work I was in, fishing for clues as to how I might have broken my foot. When I told him I was an architect, he said he owned a lot of acreage out near Creston and had been thinking of building a “bug-out house” there, as he called it—a place to go hunker down and live off the grid in the event of a tsunami, a zombie apocalypse, or the imposition of martial law. He specified that it had to be outfitted in such a way that all five of the Latina girls could go there with him to hide out from the rest of civilization for at least a year or two—until the multinational vampire plague, or whatever, had run its course.

A man has to dream, right?

When I told him I specialize in passive houses, Doc Lindstrom lit up. He said he liked to travel and during a recent trip to Barcelona he’d read an in-flight magazine article about passive houses in Germany. He knew how great they were for the environment. He had no fear of suffocating in one of them. I suggested that by adding solar panels and a Tesla storage battery

in the basement, his bug-out house could become a net-zero energy building—with the potential to go completely off-grid if he drilled his own well and put in a septic tank. To sweeten the deal, I told him the California Public Utilities Commission would pay around sixty percent of the costs for the solar array and the Tesla Powerwall under their Self-Generation Incentive Program. Then I assured him that the construction costs would run him no more than \$200 to \$300 per square foot, with my fees pegged to the low end of the freelance architect range—twelve percent of total construction costs. He could get himself 1500 square feet with nice but not fancy finishes for less than half a million bucks.

Doc Lindstrom was so impressed that he wrote out a check for ten percent of my estimated commission right there on the spot, so we could get started. I walked out of his office that day hobbled by an orthopedic boot, but I had a new project to work on. I was stoked!

In the months since, Doc Lindstrom has been an ideal client, enthused and engaged every step of the way, but never sabotaging my plans with weird last-minute suggestions. He's been a bachelor all his life, so there's no pushy wife to insist that she needs a wisteria-covered pergola or a bidet room suddenly tacked on to the master bedroom. Doc Lindstrom's bug-out house is shaping up to be the high point of my architectural career thus far.

When I get out to the job site, everything about it makes me feel happy: the herringbone pattern carved in thick mud by the treads of the backhoe, the screech of a Skil saw cutting through two-by-sixes, the rhythmic thunk of a nail gun pinning down tar paper along the roofline, the cool wind drifting through beds of dry pine needles, bringing with it the scent of strong coffee wafting from an open thermos on the tailgate of a contractor's beat-to-crap Ford F-350.

There's an empty Igloo cooler in the pickup truck's bed. I've brought along two bags of convenience store ice and a case of Tecate to fill the cooler back up. Framing a house is hard, sweaty

work and I like to take care of my guys. The construction boss—Skelly, a friend of mine—doesn't mind beer on the site.

The crew is mostly Mexican and they appreciate the Tecate. It might seem counterintuitive, but I think they work harder for me when they have a buzz. I pass beers all around, even though it's still early in the afternoon. Skelly grabs two. He's a big guy—practically a giant—with a reddish-blond beard, a permanent divot in his forehead from a Port-a-John imbroglio, and a low-hanging belly that wouldn't look out of place on a friendly bull walrus—if walruses went around wearing flannel shirts and Carhartt duck bib overalls.

"You still want cork insulation glued to the sheathin' on this fuckhut?" Skelly asks me as he pops the tab on his first beer. "I know I said this before, but Icynene spray'd be a lot easier. Everyone's usin' it now."

"There's a rumor that shit's toxic," I tell him. "I know it gets rid of the need for a water vapor barrier, but I don't want it offgassing into any building of mine."

"Suit yourself, tree-hugger. I hear they're makin' spray foam insulation outta soybeans now. Maybe you and Doc Horndog should check it out."

"Sounds bogus. Just deal with the cork. If it works in Germany, it'll work for us here."

"Okay, fine. I tried...." Skelly chugs down his first beer in three great gulps. He crushes the empty can in his fist and tosses it into the pickup bed. "You got a favorite vapor barrier? I was thinkin' Prosoco R-Guard."

"Can't use it with cork. Use BASF Enershield instead."

"You got it, Hoss. How you likin' our water storage tank up on the hill there? A thing of beauty, ain't she?"

I'd decided to have the northern side of Doc Lindstrom's passive house built into a hill to get it out of the wind and stabilize the interior temperature with the thermal inertia of a burrowed out underground space. I'd asked Skelly to perch a 2,000-gallon water tank on top of that same hill, so the house

would always have water and pressure available, even if it ran out of power for some reason. Thanks to Skelly's ingenuity with shotcrete, the tank's outer surface now resembles a giant, mica-flecked boulder. He's right: it's a thing of beauty, fitting in perfectly with the natural landscape.

"Nice job," I tell him. "Maybe we should do the whole facade that way. Make the place look like Morro Rock with a door and a couple of windows cut out."

"That'd be cool," says Skelly, knowing it'll never happen.

In the coming months, we'll also be installing a small wind turbine on the hill to generate electricity, and a solar hot water system that will need to be piped indoors to a second, smaller storage tank—insulated, with a copper coil heat exchanger—so Doc Lindstrom will have a consistent supply of hot water when he goes off the grid. The sun isn't always shining when you want to get naked in your Jacuzzi with five Latina hotties.

"This is shapin' up to be your best house yet," says Skelly. He places a grimy calloused hand on my shoulder as we stand there looking things over. "I wish I could live here. You should get it written up in *Architect Magazine* or *A+U* when you're done."

Skelly used to teach an architectural appreciation course at Cal Poly, which is where I met him when I was still a student. He gave me an A- for my final essay, "Rem Koolhaas Raids the Findhorn Ecovillage." My thesis was that environmentally friendly houses and ecovillages wouldn't achieve mass appeal until star architects like Rem Koolhaas and Frank Gehry started making them look sexy. The people living at Findhorn have the lowest ecological footprint of any community in the industrialized world; I argued that if someone like Koolhaas appropriated Findhorn's techniques for living and married them to "a contemporary architectural interpretation of the sublime" the result could permanently change the world for the better. I'm a believer in slowly ripening social transformations, as opposed to violent coup d'états and revolutions. Years later, after we became friends, Skelly admitted that he should have given me an

A+ for that paper, but his less-evolved self back then had found my writing style too glib.

Typical.

I'd been out of touch with Skelly while I was living in San Diego, but about three years after my move to Morro Bay I ran into him one night in a saloon across the street from the beach in the neighboring town of Cayucos. He looked pretty rough for a college professor. People were avoiding him. But I sat right down and bought him a pitcher of beer. We ended up bonding over stories of the emotional maladies inflicted on us by our ex-wives.

Skelly's ex, Heather, had recently started a new life as a massage therapist on the Hawaiian island of Lanai. According to Skelly, Heather was supernaturally gorgeous and a slutty genius in the sack—lively, multi-orgasmic, and just plain nasty—but for the last five years of their marriage she'd been acting distant and weird. She used to disappear for weeks at a time to the Bay Area, where she was studying to become a Reiki practitioner—or so she claimed. When she returned, she always had a big stack of twenties and hundreds in her backpack.

Skelly suspected some form of high-class prostitution, but he'd never summoned the testicular fortitude to confront her about it. He was too afraid of losing her. Besides, the money helped out with bills and paid for the occasional night out on the town, which they couldn't have afforded otherwise. But the deep-fried Rocky Mountain oysters at Señor Pepe's Argentine Cantina turned bitter in Skelly's mouth when he paused, mid-chew, to consider the notion that Heather might have been sucking off strangers in San Francisco to pay for those savory appetizers.

Despite Skelly's non-confrontational nature—or, perhaps, because of it—Heather had ditched him in the end. Skelly said he wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't been raising Heather's two sons with her for the previous eight years. When the divorce papers finally arrived, Priority Express from Honolulu, Josh was on the verge of thirteen and Shaq had just turned nine. Skelly thought of himself as a father to those two boys, even though they weren't biologically related (Shaq actually

looked like a pint-sized version of the famous Lakers basketball player, Shaquille O'Neal, a fact that had led to the swift dissolution of Heather's first marriage to a big shot Jewish film producer—and former sports enthusiast—down in Los Angeles).

Josh and Shaq had told Skelly repeatedly, via letters and phone calls, that the feeling was mutual—*he was their dad*—and they'd begged him to move to Lanai to be with them, even if their mother insisted on keeping separate houses. Skelly had given that a shot, but he'd found himself weirdly locked out of the Lanai job market. Three thousand people living there and not one of them would hire him, not even to dig a ditch. Larry Ellison, the mega-billionaire CEO of Oracle, owned ninety-eight percent of the whole damn island—and after three solid weeks of rejections, Skelly started to wonder if Heather had done something to jinx his prospects.

"She's been givin' ol' Larry handjobs, I bet..." was his dark assessment of the situation when we were deep into our third pitcher of Dos Equis. "Heather has magic fingers. She could make me pop off like a Pez dispenser, multiple times."

"Too much information..." I said, covering my ears.

"Did I mention her 'Cleopatra grip'? Or that her pussy always tasted like mint jelly? I have no idea how she did that. Every other clit I ever licked tasted more like stale cat food. Now Larry Ellison's gettin' that Minty Fresh pussy action and it's my own damn fault. I didn't exactly knock it out of the ballpark on the traditional breadwinner front. Know what I'm sayin'?"

I knew. I'd been there myself.

After Skelly's less-than-triumphant return from Lanai, he decided to start his own construction company, knowing he could never afford to jet off to the Hawaiian islands every few months to see his boys on an adjunct professor's salary.

"They were never gonna make good on their promise of tenure, anyway," he concluded. "Goddam academic ass-biters."

I've been hiring Skelly and his mostly Mexican crew to build all my projects ever since.

ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY AND THE HONEY BADGER

I end up spending the entire afternoon at Doc Lindstrom's house-in-progress. When the sun disappears beneath the tree line and a glowing cream-colored light suffuses the sky, I tell Skelly I'll treat him to dinner at the Hofbrau, back in Morro Bay, where they have delicious roast beef sandwiches with *au jus* sauce and Hefeweizen on tap.

We while away a few hours at one of the Hofbrau's glossy polyurethane-impregnated plank tables, pounding Hefeweizens and scanning the room for pretty women to gaze at while we slurp and chew. Skelly likes them a little older than I do. He's a cougar-chaser. He fills me in on the latest details from his middle-aged divorcée conquests—stories that are both tawdry and hilarious. Toward the end, he turns serious and spends our remaining time complaining about how his boys are turning into school-despising little surf rats. Skelly can actually *feel* them getting dumber when they're on the phone with him. He also fears they'll get eaten by sharks. He says he's looking forward to Judgment Day, when he'll get to tell God exactly what he thinks of Him and this shabby, treacherous world He's created.

By the time I get back home, it's almost nine o'clock and I'm feeling pretty beat. I have an HD movie rental from Netflix that I've been meaning to watch—*Jodorowsky's Dune*—so I hit Play with the remote and stretch out on the couch. It's a documentary

about *The Greatest Science Fiction Movie Never Made*. It starts out with a long camera pan across an artfully arranged collection of photos, books, and movies related to Alejandro Jodorowsky, the Chilean genius who directed the cult films *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. Jodorowsky is talking in voice-over, saying the goal of life is to “create yourself a soul,” that movies are essential to the human soul, and so forth—all stuff I tend to believe. It reminds me of a quote from John Keats that I used in my first book: “*Call the world if you Please ‘The vale of Soul-making’. Then you will find out the use of the world.*”

Anyway, the gist of the documentary is that back in the mid-1970s Jodorowsky’s next movie project, after *The Holy Mountain*, was supposed to be a film adaptation of Frank Herbert’s epic science fiction novel, *Dune*. Some rich guys in France had optioned the book and raised enough cash for him to go into pre-production, so Jodorowsky started assembling a team of “spiritual warriors” to help him get the movie made. The team he came up with was flat-out amazing: Orson Welles, Mick Jagger, David Carradine, and Salvador Dalí signed on to star in the movie; Pink Floyd was going to do the soundtrack; and the visuals were being handled by H.R. Giger, Jean ‘Moebius’ Giraud, Chris Foss, and Dan O’Bannon. But then, sometime around 1976—after two years of work at a cost of over two million dollars—the financing abruptly dried up and the *Dune* project was shelved. However, Giger, Giraud, Foss, and O’Bannon stayed together and went on to help create the 1979 megahit, *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott.

Why did *Dune*’s financing evaporate? Well, Jodorowsky’s proposed movie was definitely ahead of its time. He was trying to film *Dune* before *Star Wars*, before *Alien*, before *The Terminator*. The documentary made the argument—successfully, I thought—that those other movies had all found some of their inspiration in Jodorowsky’s phonebook-sized script, which contained extensive storyboards and concept art, and which had been sent around to all the major studios as the *Dune* team was seeking completion financing. But I suspect there was something more to it than

that—something to do with Jodorowsky's uncompromising dedication to his spiritual path.

There's a relentless counterforce in the world that opposes human soul creation, an immeasurable malevolence that would have us believe the soul is no more than a pitiful abstraction born of wishful thinking. That same counterforce would have us go through our lives guided only by materialistic joltings of fear, greed, and pain in a compassionless world plagued by chickenshit rules that always favor humanity's exploiters. Artists like Alejandro Jodorowsky present a serious threat to the soulless status quo because they speak to the limitless consciousness of man and expose the counterforce's agenda.

(And isn't it odd that, without Jodorowsky's spiritual guidance, those other four guys on his team crossed over to the dark side and ended up making one of the most terrifying movies of all time? *Alien* is a movie that would have counted as a stellar achievement for a race of soul-sucking interdimensional parasites bent on harvesting negative human emotions—but I'll keep my thoughts on Loosh to myself at this point....)

By the time the documentary ends, I'm so fired up about Jodorowsky that I hop onto the Internet to learn more about him. I start on UTube, looking for his first film, *Fando y Lis*. I can only find a few clips, each running four minutes or less. They're all exceedingly strange, like outtakes from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*.

In the first clip, a heavily mascaraed blonde girl (think Twiggy with a crushing case of ennui) slowly eats a white rose, watched over by creepy dolls, while air raid sirens wail and bombs explode on the soundtrack. In another clip, a jazz trio plays in the rubble of a bombed out insane asylum (the pianist doesn't seem to notice, or care, that his upright piano is on fire) while rich people in formal eveningwear slowly dance to the music.

Metaphors for our times, perhaps?

From there, I start skipping around: I watch a ten-minute video of Jodorowsky discussing his work with the Tarot de

Marseille, which I find fascinating because I used the twenty-two cards from the Tarot de Marseille's Major Arcana as chapter headings and illustrations in my last book. Then I watch a six-part video series of Jodorowsky discussing psychomagic—his own maverick brand of psychotherapy. Specifically, he discusses his thoughts on the family tree, asserting that a family “brands us, possesses us, like voodoo.” He says we identify with our family's history of illness and sorrows, and later manifest similar ills in our own lives, in order to be loved. A mental or physical illness, in Jodorowsky's way of seeing things, is a shout saying: “Look at me! Love me!” and above all “Take away this prohibition from me!” (i.e. the prohibition to be fully yourself, free of your family's negative influences). Jodorowsky claims that a psychomagically-inspired creative act can break you out of your everyday routines and heal any unconsciously programmed ills that have been passed down to you from generation to generation.

Makes sense to me....

I find out that Jodorowsky lives in Paris. He does free Tarot readings there once a month at the Librarie Les Cent Cielis. That causes my brain to start jumping around with associative thoughts, leading me to dive into the whirlpool of news and propaganda surrounding the recent Charlie Hebdo massacre.

On the morning of January 7th, two fake-Muslim brothers with ties to Al Qaeda's Yemen branch forced their way into the offices of Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical weekly newspaper. Armed with AK-47s, Skorpion submachine guns, and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, the brothers killed eleven people and wounded eleven others. Then, for good measure, they killed a Muslim French National Police officer on the sidewalk outside the Charlie Hebdo headquarters while they were being videotaped. After that, they hung around their rental car for a while, picked up a stray shoe off the road, and drove away. Later, they conveniently left an ID card in the abandoned rental car so the police could quickly identify them and hunt them down.

Shades of the 9/11 setup there....

I see on Cryptogon.com—my most trusted alternative news source—that the terrorist suspects were (allegedly) killed in public shootouts last week. But I'm more interested in the little-reported fact that the 45-year-old Parisian police commissioner investigating the massacre, Helric Fredou, supposedly shot and killed himself on January 8th shortly after interviewing the family of one of the victims. Did Fredou discover something that made him realize the whole show was a hoax? Did someone take him out, making it look like a suicide, because he knew too much? The intelligence agencies here in the US and abroad have a long history of doing sneaky, reprehensible things like that. I'm thinking, specifically, of Operation Gladio. Based on everything I've read so far, I'm pretty sure that the Charlie Hebdo hit job was a false flag event with the added benefit of declaring a (state-sponsored) jihad on satirists.

It's after midnight and I'm fading fast. I search around for some lighter fare. Without even knowing how I arrived at it, I find myself watching a video called "The Crazy Nastyass Honey Badger." It's a crudely edited mammal show narrated by a guy named Randall, who sounds effusively gay. I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open, but I catch him saying:

"Look—here comes a fierce battle between a king cobra and a honey badger. I wonder what'll happen? Look at this! There's the honey badger, just eating a mouse. And then look: 'Get away from me!' says the snake. 'Get away from me!'"

I open my eyes long enough to see a king cobra being chased through the night by a honey badger. hilariously, the king cobra looks scared shitless. Randall continues his narration:

"Honey badger don't care. Honey badger smacks the shit out of it. And the snake comes back and it lashes right at the honey badger. Oh... little does the honey badger know, FYI, it's been stung... it's been bitten by the snake. So while it's eating the snake—ew, that's disgusting!—meanwhile the poisonous venom is seeping through the honey badger's body... and it passes out. Look at that sleepy fuck."

My eyes flutter open in time to see the honey badger roll over limp and splay-legged, displaying his furry little nutsack like a some pantsless frat boy on a tequila bender. Randall explains:

“Now the honey badger’s just gonna pass out for a few minutes and then it’s gonna get right back up and start eating all over again, ‘cause it’s a hungry little bastard. Look at this! Like nothing happened! The honey badger gets right back up and continues eating the cobra. How disgusting. And, of course, what does the honey badger have to eat for the next two weeks? Cobra.”

At that point I click off the TV with the remote and pass out on the couch, just like a cobra-stung honey badger.

Look at that sleepy fuck....

NOT EVEN WRONG WITH PAM FROM SIAM

Sometime during the night, I wake to the sound of my front door creaking open. My first sleep-addled thought is to grab the TV remote to defend myself. (*By changing channels maybe?*) But then I hear Trout's toenails ticking across the linoleum and I relax. It's just my girlfriend, Pam From Siam, paying me a late-night visit.

Trout is Pam's dog. He's a hybrid of Australian Shepherd and Standard Poodle—two of the most intelligent dog breeds in the world. People call them Aussiepoos, or Aussiedoodles, which sounds undignified to me. I always try to use the two full breed names whenever I'm asked to explain Trout's origins.

I'm also often asked to explain his name. I point out that Trout has a shiny grey coat with black splotches along the sides and white belly hair below, so he kind of looks like a trout. That's easier than trying to explain my girlfriend's warped sense of literary humor. The truth is that Trout's name is a nod to one of Pam's favorite books: Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*.

Tick, tick, tickity, tick... Trout comes into the darkened living room and hops up on the end of the couch near my feet. That's his spot. He wags his silky tail and blinks his goofy eyes at me, expecting some pats. One eye is sky blue and the other is brown

flecked with gold. I sit up and rub Trout's neck just beneath his ears, making circular motions with both hands. He leans into it with his mouth open wide and starts to pant. Soon his long pink tongue lolls out over his black-lipped jowls. He seems to be smiling in doggy ecstasy.

Few things in life are better than hanging out with a friendly, intelligent dog. I love Trout almost as much as I love Pam.

I can hear her in the bathroom. She must have really needed to pee, not to say hello first. I listen to her moving around in there: toilet flushing, the faucet on the sink turning on and off, pipes complaining, a cabinet door squeaking open and then thumping shut. I must have forgot to put out the guest towels.

Pam has a key to my place and she pretty much comes and goes as she pleases. We've been dating for two-and-a-half years now, but she still insists on keeping her tiny second-floor apartment down by the beach in Cayucos—which is fine by me. We're both earning enough to keep up with the rent and we're so set in our ways that living together might prove to be a disaster. The only thing that even slightly bothers me about the situation is that Pam has never given me a key to her place. In fact, I rarely even see her there. It's like she has this whole separate existence, apart from me—and she intends to keep it that way.

"Derek? Your filthy-minded love goddess is here."

Pam stands naked, silhouetted in the dim light from the bathroom doorway. She's almost a parody of the ideal female form—a curvy archetype. Long runner's legs, a yoga-sculpted abdomen, a peach-shaped high booty of the type that hip-hop artists love to feature in their music videos, and breasts of such sensuously pleasing convexity and symmetry that I always pause for a moment of mute adoration every time she slips free of her Frederick's of Hollywood bra.

"I'm a lucky man," I say. I know men aren't supposed to admit that beauty matters (even though women spend tons of time and money trying to make themselves look beautiful), but Pam is far and away the most gorgeous woman I've ever met and

I can't deny the fact that I'm both grateful and proud that she's chosen to be my girlfriend. "What brings you here so late?" I ask her. "Couldn't sleep?"

"I've been on a writing jag," Pam says, gliding over to the couch and sitting down between Trout and me. She pets us both. "Thirty pages of script in three days."

"That's great," I say, meaning it. From personal experience, I know there's deep satisfaction to be had from a good writing jag.

"Yeah, but I hit a wall tonight and decided it was time to do some boyfriend maintenance," she says, leaning over to unbuckle my belt.

"Boyfriend maintenance? That's what you call this?"

"I don't want to lose you. Trout, off the couch—you can't watch this."

As if he understands Pam's every word, Trout hops off the couch and pads into the kitchen to curl up on the floor with a resigned canine huff.

I'm suddenly reminded of Pam's other lovely features: her thick, jet-black hair, her tawny Thai skin, her pillowy-soft lips and perfect white teeth... and her warm, wet, willing mouth.

"Oh wow... *Pam...*" I say, somewhere between a whisper and a groan.

My girlfriend only slurps in response. It's a slobbering soliloquy, a poem composed of spit and tongue. A line from Richard Brautigan recurs to me: *the sweet juices of your mouth are like castles bathed in honey*.

"Get up here. I can't take that much longer," I tell her. She climbs into my lap then, grinning, and gives me a deep French kiss. I'm kind of glad I didn't spurt.

Within moments, I'm buried in her to the creamy hilt. Pam has always been a well-lubricated girl, but tonight she's hot and sopping. She rocks on top of me, Kegel muscles clenching, while I push my pants toward the floor. They pile in a wad at my ankles. I didn't even have time to take off my boots.

“It’s been too long,” she whispers, darting her tongue into my ear. She unbuttons my shirt so she can press her warm, full breasts against my bare skin. With Pam, I feel like I can never get enough of her, never get my body rammed up tight enough against her, never get enough skin-on-skin. I manage to get one of my boots kicked off and shake my sock-clad foot free of wadded jeans. I stand up then with Pam still impaled on me. She loops her arms around my neck with a surprised laugh as I stagger toward the bedroom, gripping her magnificent ass in both hands.

When we get to the bedroom, I throw her down on top of my waterbed. Pam sloshes around, squealing, and spreads her lissome legs. That’s all the encouragement I need. I dive in face-first to explore her vulva’s coral pink crevices (*as the waterbed’s sloshing submerges my thoughts in moronic marine metaphors for sex...*). Pam shudders and groans as I taste her sea-salty oyster drool. My tongue probes her hidden depths and swims through shimmery waves of pleasure to lick at her clitoral crest. She presses hard against my puckered lips as I kiss her Pearl Harbor. In my mind, I’m a man in a boat, riding her high swells and rip currents. Then I’m plunged into ocean-deep silence as her spasmy thighs crush my ears. All I can hear is the bloodrush inside my own head and Pam faintly keening:

“*Oh, God! Oh, Derek! Oh, ghab—mmh bnnh mmbbb—Oh!!!*”

“Let’s do that again...” I suggest, after Pam finally unclamps. I get in another furtive lick at her clit as she shoos me away with a backhand, knuckles rapping across my forehead.

“I guess that’s a no, huh?”

“I need a breather,” she gasps, sweat-slickened breasts heaving. “One sec... then I want you to fuck me. *Hard.*”

No further instructions required.



"I finally found my spiritual twin!" Pam gushes. For a brief post-coital moment, I think she's paying me the ultimate compliment. But no, she's talking about another writer: "You have to check out this book I just read. It's called *I Love Dick*."

"What is it? Some sort of nympho manifesto?"

"No! Not at all! Or well... *kind of*. It was written by this boho intellectual chick named Chris Kraus. She's an experimental filmmaker who used to be married to a famous college professor who's into postmodern semiotics and S&M."

"Always a good combo..." I say. The snark just leaps out of me at times. I can't help it.

"Shut up," Pam explains, kissing my cheek, "you'd like her. She's just like me. She used to work in a titty bar when she was younger. She told Buddhist fairy tales to all the scumbag lawyers and discount orthodontists while she spread her legs so they could sniff around her pussy."

Whoomp! there it is... Pam paid for her Cal Arts MFA in Film and Video by moonlighting at Jumbo's Clown Room. Jumbo's is sort of the Cirque du Soleil of major strip clubs, located right on Hollywood Boulevard. The emphasis there is on natural beauty and pole-dancing athleticism, rather than bolt-on tits and boner-rubbing raunch. Pam swears that during the three-and-a-half years she worked there, she never once had to take off her panties. But it goes without saying that she got hit on a lot—hence her contempt for lawyers and orthodontists.

She hasn't finished talking: "Toward the end of this *I Love Dick* book, there's a line that I just thought was so amazing. Listen... she wrote, 'Desire isn't lack, it's surplus energy—a claustrophobia inside your skin.'"

"Hmph..." I hmph.

Pam gives me a long, hard look. Not sensing sufficient enthusiasm, she says, "Isn't that cool? I mean... *it's so true!*"

I only nod my head in agreement. I'm probably not feeling it as much as Pam, with the quote taken out of context, but she's right: the line *does* ring true for me. I've just never thought about

desire in that way because of my natural affinity for Swedish-Buddhism (“All suffering comes from desire” and “Pass the hateful *lutfisk*, please...”).

“She also said that reading makes good on what sex promises but hardly ever delivers—it helps our souls get bigger by merging with another person’s heart, mind, and spirit. You would love this book, Derek, I swear. She writes about Gnosticism, your man Antonin Artaud, and this awful labor strike down in Guatemala against Coca-Cola, where a whole bunch of people got killed. She said the Coca-Cola strike—kicked off by one of Bush’s ultra-right-wing pals—was, like, a microcosmic indictment of everything that’s wrong with late-stage capitalism. She called it ‘a paradigm for the relationship between multinational franchises and host governments.’ It’s the same stuff you’ve been writing about, almost—‘wanting something else so fiercely that you want it for the world.’ There are so many parallels... in the book, she even mentions that she came up here once, to Morro Bay.”

“What was she doing in Morro Bay?”

“She came here to drop acid sometime around 1995.”

“We only missed each other by fifteen or twenty years.”

“I know. It’s so weird! She’s my new favorite author—aside from you, of course.” Pam gives my prick a playful squeeze beneath the sheets. “I wish I could get an interview with her for my show, but she’s in Switzerland now, teaching at some college, so far as I can tell.”

“There’s always Skype...” I remind her.

Pam hosts a weekly video series on her UTube channel called *Not Even Wrong with Pam From Siam*. She’s been doing it since she met me. She now has over three hundred thousand followers, which I find almost unbelievable, compared to my own two-dozen loyal readers (like I said, nobody reads anymore...). For the past year, Pam has been making enough money from UTube’s paid ad program to cover all the expenses of her bare bones lifestyle. I’ve been helping her out along the way—doing

the video capture during her lectures and tossing her ideas for those same lectures while she's working them out in her head—but Pam does all the rest: lighting, editing, soundtrack splicing, green screen masking, and so on. She's a total pro.

The idea for the series came to her one night, early in our relationship, while we were watching a Nick Cave video in my living room. The song was “More News from Nowhere.” It's a slinky tune set in a strip club with all these old men perving on beautiful young women. Nick and his band, The Bad Seeds, are performing on the club's center stage, dressed like louche beach bums. It's a great video if you're into Nick Cave's music at all. One sequence in particular stood out for us: a silver-haired guy, who resembles the actor James Coburn, sits at the bar sipping a whiskey on the rocks and tapping his hand in time to the music, when out of the darkened nowhere this gorgeous girl slowly twirls down sideways on a stripper pole until she comes to rest on the bar right in front of the old guy with a cocked elbow supporting her head at a jaunty tilt. There's something magical about that shot (props to Nick Cave's videographer), but Pam knew exactly how to recreate it, starring herself, for the opening title sequence of the video series she's been occupied with ever since.

Not Even Wrong with Pam From Siam is cobbled together from lectures, interviews, and stock footage related to whatever scholarly topics Pam happens to be interested in during any given week. Each episode runs about fifteen minutes and they all end the same way: with Pam stripped down to her lingerie. One week she'll be unpacking theoretical physicist David Bohm's ideas about panprotopsychism as it relates to the quantum field, and another week she'll be riffing on my email buddy Jack Sarfatti's ideas about backwards-in-time influences, veiled nonlocality, and cosmic censorship—stuff he refers to under the blanket term *retrocausality*.

(Commenting on Mozart's famous claim that he heard his music in his head fully composed and would write his scores as if taking notation, Jack Sarfatti wrote: “Mozart hearing music is simply his remote viewing his future performance in a self-

consistent Novikov loop of post-quantum information made possible by Antony Valentini's entanglement signal nonlocality. This is retrocausal self-creation mistakenly called one of the time-travel paradoxes by retarded physicists." Pam took that as the starting point for her most recent show, by saying, "WTF, Jack? What is that supposed to even mean?" She then went on to explain those terms, one-by-one—remote viewing, time loop logic and the Novikov self-consistency principle, Valentini's controversial "signal nonlocality" hypothesis that would allow quantum entanglement to be used as a stand-alone communication channel—until Sarfatti started making sense to all the Internet viewers out there who *weren't* hyper-intelligent 75-year-old theoretical physicists just like him.)

For next week's show, Pam has told me she's planning to examine Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* as it applies to—or was misinterpreted by—the Wachowski brothers' movie, *The Matrix*. But it's a good bet she'll trash that idea and end up doing a long review of Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* instead, since that seems to be her current obsession.

Pam is the only person I know who reads more books than I do.

The *Not Even Wrong* part of her show's title comes from an infamous remark made by the theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli who, when asked to comment on a paper written by a young physicist, found it so far from being correct that, according to Pauli, it was "not even wrong." Pam enjoys using her series as a forum to call bullshit on mass media propaganda and to show her disdain for cultural idiocies, using "Not even wrong!" as a frequent catchphrase. That she does so while wearing provocative clothing and dancing around a stripper pole only adds to the considerable *frisson* of the show. (*L.A. Weekly* dubbed her "Queen of the Underboob Selfie" in its most recent survey of Best Under-the-Radar Artists on the West Coast.)

As for the other part of the title—the *Pam From Siam*—well, that was Pam's stripper name, of course. She chose to keep it for the series—either out of sheer perversity, or as some sort of ironic comment on feminist empowerment (kind of like when

Hannah Wilke exhibited a poster of herself in 1977, topless and dotted with wads of chewed-up bubblegum, under the title, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*). I like to think Pam is helping other women transcend restrictive cultural concepts of femininity with her sexual-intellectual adventurousness, but that's just me. What's certain is that she's never shied away from her stripper past. Her mother, Paithoon, was a notorious Bangkok prostitute, to hear Pam tell it, so the college-financing interlude at Jumbo's Clown Room seems like small potatoes in comparison.

Interesting fact: Paithoon was the star of Pam's final thesis project. The film that qualified Pam for her MFA from Disney-sponsored Cal Arts was called—rather harshly, I've always thought—*Paithoon: Requiem for My Mother, a Dying Whore*.

Right before we became lovers, Pam downloaded a copy of *Paithoon* onto my home computer. I've watched it several times now without her. Hitting the play button on it always reminds me of a rotten molar I once had that I couldn't stop probing with my tongue, despite the pain it caused me. In a way, *Paithoon* is a precursor to *Not Even Wrong*... but the emotions it stirs up in me are far more troubling.

You can see the embryonic idea for the video series in the way Pam interviews her mother, who's on the verge of dying from metastasizing breast cancer after a double mastectomy that didn't do the job. (Pam would later blame her mother's death on faulty silicone implants and add her name to the list in a class action lawsuit that's still ongoing.) Paithoon is in her early-fifties at the time of the interview, but she looks twenty years older. She's reclining in a hospital bed with stainless steel rails on the sides. Pam is curled up on the bed next to her. There's no bedsheet covering them. The camera is looking down, framing them from a God's eye perspective overhead. Pam wears a sheer black bra, black satin panties, and black fishnet stockings held up by a matching lace corset. She's a vision of loveliness, as always, but her lush beauty is offset by her mother's stark wrinkled nudity. Paithoon is laid out alongside Pam like a Holocaust victim—her bone-jutting anorexic limbs, sparse gray bush, and

horrid pink mastectomy scars on full display. It's as if Pam is saying of her own pulchritude: *This is what I look like now, but this is what I'll become.*

"Do you remember that film about my mom?" Pam asks me, as if she's reading my mind. "There's a part in there, where she zones out and starts talking in Isan, her native language from the little village where she grew up in northeast Thailand. I had to have it translated, because I only know Thai, but what she said was: 'We're all whores and pimps in this world.' Do you remember that?"

I remember. In the film, Pam and her mother are talking about Paithoon's life among the brothels, massage parlors, and go-go bars of Bangkok, and about her decision to escape that life soon after she gave birth to Pam outside of wedlock. (Way, way outside of wedlock; Paithoon admits, on camera, that she had no clue who Pam's father might have been among the hundreds of men she'd had sex with during her whoring heyday.) Paithoon recounts how she seduced an obese vacationing film editor from Los Angeles and convinced him to marry her, briefly, so she could immigrate and get a green card. After the divorce, Paithoon says she started working in the San Fernando Valley's adult film industry because it paid better and seemed less dangerous than whoring. "Although it was still whoring," she admits, staring straight into the camera lens during an extreme close-up. At that point, Paithoon's jade green eyes go all strange and she lapses into Isan with an air of bone-crushing weariness. Subtitles appear, reading:

"For the poor, to be born is the worst of all disasters. To have a body that must be fed and housed and clothed—it's such a burden. Even dying is not so bad compared to being born. I was born too poor to worry about my dignity, so I became a whore to survive. But we're all whores and pimps in this world. Usually both. No one is truly free. Not the banker. Not the lawyer. Not even the President. The President is the biggest whore and pimp of them all, whoring after billions from his rich friends and then pimping the whole country to pay his debts. You ask me and I will tell you: I was just a simple, honest whore. I'm not ashamed of it. I showed true kindness to the men who wanted to fuck

me. I tried to make them feel virile and loved. Our compassion for others in this life determines how we'll fare in the next world. I'm happy to die, knowing I wasn't a greedy banker or an evil, lying President."

"I remember almost exactly what your mom said," I tell Pam. "It's etched in my memory."

Other scenes are etched in my memory as well. Like the film's ten-minute montage of gonzo sex clips featuring Paithoon, made during the mid-1990s Internet porn boom in the San Fernando Valley before free sites like YouPorn and xHamster came along and decimated what had been, until then, a multi-billion-dollar industry. The montage showcased some pretty raw stuff. Paithoon seemed to specialize in accommodating freakishly large cocks in every possible orifice, often three at a time. Pam chose to eliminate the original soundtracks from those clips and set the montage to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade, Opus 35: I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship* as performed by the Kirov Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev, which lent an elegiac tone to the sleazy proceedings.

"Well, if you remember what my mom said, there's this really weird paragraph in *I Love Dick*..." Pam is saying. "I guess there's a French film I've never seen, starring Isabella Huppert. She plays a whore in it. At one point her pimp gets her in the backseat of a car and starts spanking her, saying: 'Who's independent? The maid? The bureaucrat. The banker? No!' It's like synchronistic shorthand for what my mom said. And Chris Kraus decided to write about just that one scene—and nothing else from the rest of the movie."

"Uncanny," I say, still thinking about Pam's mom getting triple-reamed by Long Dong Silver, Mister Mandingo, and the Abominable Hoseman, or whoever.... Paithoon was in her early thirties when those videos were being shot and she looked every bit as alluring then as Pam does now. She also possessed a certain something else, something rather extraordinary among the usual flux of fake-moaning porn actresses:

Paithoon seemed to take genuine pleasure in her work.

She would almost float through the air while fucking, like a joyriding succubus. The Thai culture takes its stories about ghosts and demons far more seriously than we do in the West. Most Americans would be unwilling to consider the possibility, but in some of those old porn clips it appeared—to me, at least—that a lusty invisible entity was possessing Paithoon.

There's one more thing: in close-ups, I could see that Paithoon had deep green eyes with an Egyptian slant to them, a trait that must be vanishingly rare among Thai women. Weirder still, sometimes—usually during the moment of orgasm—I thought I saw Paithoon's pupils shifting from round black dots into vertical, cat-like slits. Maybe it was just a trick of CGI from Industrial Light & Magic, or one of their aping competitors, but I'd swear I saw it happen more than once—in videos shot at different studios, during different years—and each time the effect came across as hair-raisingly real. If it was nothing but a CGI illusion, it was an illusion created by a master of the medium. And who would go to such trouble for the sake of a low-budget porn video?

Pam, it should be noted, has the very same eyes as her mother, minus the feline pupils. And that, more than anything, is what I've always found so disturbing about watching *Paithoon*:

I can't help thinking that one night, during a fit of passion, I might find myself staring into the unspeakably horny eyes of a skin-clad Thai cat.

HELL IS EMPTY

After Pam and I drift off to sleep, I dream that I'm marrying a Greek shipping heiress. She's tall and slender, with Mediterranean good looks, but her breasts are small and slack beneath her elegant white wedding gown and her thin, almost nonexistent lips are set in a prim line, as if she's clamping down on a razor blade. That's all the information I need, within the logic of the dream, to know she doesn't love me.

Years pass in an instant. I'm a cuckold now. I find myself standing at a pharmacy counter purchasing a three-month supply of purple acid reflux pills for my wife's not-so-secret lover. He's an older guy, the Greek equivalent of my ex-wife's jewelry store beau: close-cropped silver hair and beard, a fierce suntan, Gucci shirt half-unbuttoned to display his hairy chest, an ancient Athenian Owl coin on a braided gold chain around his neck, and too-white teeth with the gleam of a Euro-design urinal. He's made a fortune by financing a string of rent-jacked mobile home parks for paroled drug felons. When I hand him the white bag full of pills, he says to me with a mournful look: "She's killing us both."

I'd prefer not to have anything to do with the guy, but I need to be reimbursed for the pills or I won't have enough money to buy lunch in the coming weeks. My wife's expenditures have been ruinous. She's been spending my paychecks on neo-Grecian

garden gnome statuary depicting ribald couplings from a famous Japanese pervert's *shunga netsuke* collection. She also has a full-time landscaping crew looking after the Stephen-King-inspired boxwood maze and topiary in our backyard, which features solid bronze fountains in the shape of striking king cobras and vomiting swans. Whenever I ask her to cut back on her frivolous spending, she says: "Why can't you be a man and support me like all the other husbands we know?" By other husbands, she seems to be referring exclusively to Greek shipping tycoons.

Everything within the dream seems perfectly real, like lived experience. I have no sense at all that I'm dreaming—not even when the dream shifts again and I'm rocketed into the future, where I find myself greeting one of my best friends from high school, Steve Jespersen. Steve is sitting in a red leatherette booth at the Fresno Ramada Inn in the midst of our 25-year class reunion. I go over to congratulate him on his daughter's recent coronation. I know from a front-page article in *The Kingsburg Recorder* that his sixteen-year-old daughter, Tyra, was selected as the new queen of our hometown's annual Swedish Festival Parade—an honor also bestowed on my grandmother almost 80 years ago.*

I recall that Steve is one of those guys who left Kingsburg for a few years after high school, but then moved right back, dissatisfied with what he'd found in the wider world. He tells me he's pleased with his well-ordered life: his lovely Chicana wife,

* For a moment, I become a cowering towheaded child along the festival's parade route, getting pelted by hard peppermint candies hurled from the deck of a brown cardboard Viking longship decorated with cartoonish war shields and wavy black lines painted on its sides to indicate the seams between planks. The ship is crowded with drunken Rotarians wearing papier-mâché breastplates, women's wigs, and pointy silver-and-gold plastic helmets with diminutive moose antlers attached. As they drift past me in slow motion, the shitfaced Rotary Club marauders raise injection-molded Halloween daggers and jiggle their flabby white arms while shouting fake Norse obscenities at the geriatric parade enthusiasts lining the curb in webbed aluminum folding lawn chairs, who respond with laughter and approving clacks from their coffee-stained dentures. Another invective-propelled fusillade of peppermints clatters on the pavement all around me as a garage band's inept cover rendition of Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" starts yowling from speaker horns mounted on the ship's dragon-headed prow. Then the scene freezes and slides back down the memory hole, leaving me thinking: *Man... that was weird.*

their three precocious children, their custom-built four-bedroom ranch house, and his job as an IT Director for the Kingsburg Unified School District.

I tell him I feel like a first-class fuck-up in comparison.

I've stopped writing, stopped designing passive houses. My Greek wife is on me like a shrieking harpy, riding me into an early grave. Her father pulled some strings to get me hired at a multinational conglomerate that builds for-profit prisons, so I could bring home the big bucks. I've been drawing plans for the new Supermaxes—fourteen hours a day, six days a week. That's my whole life now. I've been doing it for years. I always have a cold. I can't breathe properly through my nose, so I find it hard to sleep. I rarely get to see our twin toddler boys—who only speak Greek, so I can't understand a single word they say.

Already, the twins are exhibiting a knack for rapacity usually only seen in those born to privilege and wealth. They won't let other children play with their toys without first taking out insurance policies that guarantee to pay twice the toys' replacement value in the event of damage or theft. The twins wholly own the LLC that issues the toy insurance—although it's registered under the name of a shell company in the Cayman Islands for tax evasion purposes. They collect exorbitant monthly premiums from every snot-nosed kid in our gated community. But despite several toy mishaps, the policies have never paid out a single drachma. There's always something in the fine print to absolve the insurers of liability. After the hapless toy abusers find out that their insurance claims have been denied, they end up getting sued by the twins for damages in the local kid kangaroo court, where all toy abusers invariably lose, because one of the twins is a shrewd prosecuting attorney and the other is always the judge.

I'm on the verge of confessing all this to Steve when my chest starts thumping. I think I might be having a heart attack. But then I wake up on my waterbed next to sweet, still-sleeping Pam, spooning me from behind.

What a relief!

In the early morning light I see that Trout is on the bed with us, curled up next to my chest, panting. That's where the dream-thumps originated. I give Trout some pats, grateful that he's summoned me back to kinder circumstances. He raises his shaggy head and smiles as I rub his neck. The night's emasculating dreams linger with me for a moment—and then I completely forget about them.

It's still too early to get up, but I know I won't be able to go back to sleep. Not wanting to wake Pam, I reach over to a pile of books stacked on the floor next to my bed and pick up my Kindler, thinking I'll just read for a bit. But before I do that, I indulge my morning habit of connecting to Wi-Fi and doing a Glamazon store search for "Derek Swannson" to see how my books are selling.

"Holy shit..." I whisper to myself.

"What?" Pam asks, rising up to look at me.

"All three of my books are in Glamazon's Top 100 all of a sudden," I tell her, amazed.

Pam is familiar enough with book metrics to know what that means: thousands of my books have sold in the last 24 hours. "What'd you do, get an endorsement from Oprah?" she asks.

"I doubt it, but maybe someone else famous tweeted about me. I don't know what else could do it."

"For those numbers, it'd have to be someone like Limn Lardassian—and, no disrespect, but I just don't see your books appealing to her fanbase."

I do a quick vanity search on Oogle, looking for new links to my name. "I'm not seeing anything I haven't seen before," I say, scrolling through the first few pages of hits.

"Weird. Maybe the search engines haven't picked it up yet."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it won't last," I say, ever the realist when it comes to my books.

"You don't know that," says Pam, leaning over my shoulder to peer at the Kindler's screen with me. "It could be the start of a

new trend. Maybe people are finally coming around to your Gnostic way of looking at things.”

“Gnosticism isn’t simpatico with the dominant malignancies of our time. It’ll never hit the sweet spot in the *Zeitgeist*.”

“But that’s just it! Don’t you see? Maybe the *Zeitgeist* is changing. Maybe people are starting to realize that the situation on this planet is just like that Shakespeare quote from *The Tempest*: ‘Hell is empty and all the devils are here.’”

“I doubt it...” I say. “But good try, with the cheerleading.”

“Y’know, I’ve never had sex with a best-selling author before.”

“Maybe we should get in a quickie while my numbers are still up,” I say, taking the hint.

“That’s not the only thing that’s up,” says Pam, reaching under the sheets. “Having that many people interested in your work must feel pretty exciting, huh?”

“You’re the girl with over three hundred thousand followers,” I say, rolling over on top of her. “You tell me.”

“Well, I guess I find it *kind of* arousing...” she admits—wet and welcoming, as always.



“What should we do today?” I ask Pam after our early morning sex romp.

Being self-employed, Pam and I don’t *have to* do anything if we don’t feel like it. But like most successful freelancers, we almost always have a few projects going on that require our attention. Today, however, nothing’s pressing. Skelly doesn’t need me out at Doc Lindstrom’s job site again anytime soon, and I don’t have any other architect jobs lined up. I could be working on my next book—tentatively titled *The Book of Beezos*—but I’d rather spend the day with my girlfriend. Pam, in turn, could be working on the next video for her UTube channel, but she’s

already told me she wants to take a day off after her writing jag to “mentally digest” before she starts revising the script.

In other words, we’re both free.

“I don’t want to see anyone,” says Pam. “I just want to hang out with you, okay?”

Most of our friends aren’t available on weekdays, anyway. They’re all working. And to tell the truth, we don’t have that many people to call friends in the first place—unless you count social media “friends.” But we have each other. Usually, that’s enough.

Socializing has never been high on our list of priorities. Hanging out in sports bars, going to dinner parties and company picnics, networking at charity fundraising events... it’s just not for us. That’s probably a good thing, because we’ve found that making books and videos doesn’t always make you popular in your local community. The Normals around Morro Bay tend to dismiss Pam as a self-involved slut and me as a whacked-out conspiracy theorist.

We all know who the Normals are, right? They didn’t go to California art schools. Deep down, they’re convinced that most artists just spew loads of pretentious bullshit and have very little in the way of actual talent (making exceptions for Mozart and some of those nice Impressionists, of course). Ergo, the Normals don’t have much use for the arts. They’ve never fallen for that line from Picasso:

Art is a lie that makes us realize truth....

Personally, I have nothing against the Normals, even though they tend not to like me much. I think it’s okay that their interests don’t align with mine. I mean, so what if they’re unironic enthusiasts for church socials, Rotary Club luncheons, small town parades, barbecued pork ribs, fireworks on the Fourth of July, NASCAR Sprint Cup races, PGA Tour Golf, college basketball playoffs, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, the Disney Channel, celebrity gossip, family updates on Facebook, and healthy tips for living culled from newsstand magazines. I’d have to be on an intravenous drip feed of major tranquilizers to

enjoy those same mass entertainments, but good for the Normals if that's what gets them off.

Sometimes I try to remind myself to appreciate them more. The Normals have a lot to recommend them, actually. They're the ones who stick with their spouses and families, no matter what. They're the peacemakers, the do-gooders. They tend to keep regular business hours. They follow the rules and expect everyone else to do the same. Essentially, they're the glue that holds society together. Or to deploy a rough analogy from Pam's research into quantum physics: world-forming matter is made from quarks held together by gluons; the Normals are the gluons that mediate the strong interactions between society's quarky creative types.

Things only get hairy between us when the Normals go into Sanctimonious Prig Mode and decide they want to chuck the whole First Amendment because of people like me. When they start telling me I shouldn't be thinking the things I'm thinking—or writing what I'm writing—well, then we have a problem... because from my vantage point it looks like they're being brainwashed into imbecility. But I don't go around telling them they have to stop watching the Trinity Broadcasting Network and buying books from Sean Hannity or Bill O'Reilly, do I?

So let's be honest: I completely understand why the Normals will never like me. When I start speaking my mind—really saying what I think about this calamitously fucked up world—do I come across as snotty? Aloof? Half-crazed?

Probably all of the above—to *them*, at least... (I also use too many f-bombs in my books, or so I've been told).

Pam has it a lot worse than I do, because she has to deal with the sexual discrimination inherent in patriarchal societies run by power-mad elitists, in addition to all that other crap. I can attest to the fact that it never helps a woman's social standing when people find out her mother was a prostitute. Plus, guilt-free avant-garde stripping on UTube is rather frowned upon by the Home Shopping Network crowd.

It should also be noted that a lot of Normal men start acting like callow horndogs when they're in close proximity to Pam, which never endears Pam to their Normal wives—who tend *not* to look like Pam. Not even close.

“Those poor, pitiful housewives,” says Pam, “you can hardly blame ‘em. The social conservatives tell them to lock down their pussies once they become mommies—and then their husbands just go *craaaaaazzzyy*.”

All this thinking about the Normals has reminded me of the one activity that Pam and I happily share with them: we both love gardening. Pam introduced me to the pleasures of gardening early in our relationship. My front yard used to be a mess of iceplants and California poppies growing wild all over the place. Now—thanks to Pam and innumerable trips to the local nurseries—my yard looks a lot more like a Zen rock garden, full of cool-looking river stones and drought-friendly indigenous plants. I can often be found out there, just standing around, feeling happy and content while I watch everything grow.

“Feel like going to a nursery?” I ask Pam. “I’d still like to find a Hinoki Cypress for that spot by the driveway.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” she says. “Let’s go kayaking.”

It’s a warm, sunny morning, so kayaking it is....

Pam puts on her black cotton sundress and cool bitch sunglasses, while I step into khaki board shorts and shrug on an old man’s short-sleeved linen shirt in Bermuda Red with vertical white chalk stripes—a recent score from the local thrift shop.

Trout will have to stay behind—he always tries to chase after the sea lions—so we take him for a walk around the block and make sure he has enough food and water. Then I hand Pam a tube of sunscreen from the bathroom and we grease up our exposed skin until we both smell like piña coladas filtered through a sweaty gym sock. After that, we get into the Triumph and drive to a place called the Kayak Shack out in the Morro Bay State Park Marina. It’s a perfect entry point for kayaking into the heron preserve in the back bay estuary.

After I park the car, we rent a scuffed-up two-seat teal kayak from a friendly girl sitting in the dockside shack. She's reading a paperback copy of Mark Richard's *Fishboy*—an old favorite of mine. I talk to the Kayak Shack girl about that for a minute. Then we pick out our paddles, put on the mandatory grungy orange life preservers, and we're all set to go.

It feels great to be out on the water. In the distance, big blubbery harbor seals are barking like they've just spotted a mailman. One of them retches and gags like it's deep-throating a humongous burrito.

"Nice!" Pam snarks at the rude noises.

The harbor seals are basking on a scenic four-mile stretch of sandspit that protects the estuary from the open sea, making it an ideal spot for us to be paddling around. Almost right away, we get lucky. We pass alongside a sea otter—one of fewer than three thousand remaining on the California coast. He drifts by us on his back, holding aloft a spiny purple sea urchin in his hairy webbed paws, which he starts whacking against a rock positioned on his belly. *Whap, whap whap!* The sea urchin cracks and the otter starts sucking out the pinky-yellow good stuff.

"Hey little otter..." Pam calls out to him, like she's talking to a wobbly-footed puppy.

Whap, whap whap! the sea otter responds, hammering the shit out of that sea urchin. He kind of glares at Pam, as if to say: *Fuck off, lady. I'm busy here.*

Next we see a squadron of maybe thirty brown pelicans hanging out on a guano-splattered outcropping where the mouth of Chorro Creek dumps into the bay. Collectively, the pelicans remind me of George C. Scott in *Patton*. Maybe it's their bristly, crew-cut-looking heads and the reptilian dispassion in their eyes. It's easy to see the evolutionary connection between birds and dinosaurs when you're around that many pelicans. Some of them are hopping around, flapping their wings. Others are gulping air with their long, skinny beaks—throwing back their heads so we can see all the way inside their big floppy throat pouches, where they scoop up the fish. Still others are doing some underwing

cleaning, twisting their necks and scratching away with their beak tips like Lautréamont's surreal juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine.

When we paddle in to get a better look, the pelicans start arguing with us. We must be getting too close to their nests. We back off and head deeper into the estuary. We see a Great Blue Heron up ahead, standing as still as a figure in a Japanese ink-wash painting, waiting by the water's edge for fish to pass. A cacophony of twittering birds and creaking branches rises from the eucalyptus forest behind the heron as the wind picks up. A Snowy Egret launches from a high branch and flies across the creek in front of us. A synchronized team of sandpipers sprints, jerks to a halt, then sprints again, pecking in the wet sand for lunch.

"This was a good idea," I tell Pam, watching her beautiful brown shoulders flex as she paddles from the seat in front of me. Her long black hair is swaying in the breeze. I love her completely in that moment, more than I've ever loved anyone.

Pam turns to me with a big grin that seems incongruous beneath her cool shades. "I know! It's a perfect day..." she says. "And now your books are selling! How great is that?"

I wish she hadn't reminded me. The morning's sudden blast of book sales has been gnawing at me, making me feel uneasy. Sure, the money will be nice when it hits my checking account, but I'm getting a sense that it comes with unforeseen obligations—or maybe even terrifying, life-changing consequences.

My intuition is telling me that something big is about to happen. It feels like that slushy, suspended moment when you lose control of your SUV at the top of a steep icy road during a freak snowstorm. Or when your short-tempered girlfriend, who you've been meaning to dump, marches out of the bathroom waving a piss-soaked pregnancy test stick, which she then dings off your forehead, saying, "I can't fucking believe this! I'm knocked up. Now what?"

What follows—in my experience—is a hasty wedding, a bloody miscarriage, and then some rich, smug douchebag screwing you over in ways you hadn't even imagined possible.

JUSTINE ON THE BEACH

When I first glimpse the seaweed-strewn red petticoat and the twisted pair of Wicked Witch legs beneath it, still in their red-and-white striped stockings, I realize that my intuition was correct. The only part it got wrong was the delivery method for those terrifying, life-changing consequences I'd anticipated.

I know the body on the beach is Justine's before I get out of the kayak. Even from a distance, I can see that she's more of an *it* now than a person: a sand-flecked, crab-chewed corpse. But it's still Justine—my friend and fellow human—who I'd seen alive and perky just twenty-four hours earlier.

I run through the surf and across the sand, falling to my knees next to her lifeless husk. I feel myself buckling from someplace deep inside. A sob catches in my throat, bubbling through a ferrous tang. Justine's face is an eyeless, flayed mask. Her once-prominent cheekbones have been ripped open to reveal teeth, gums, bloodless pink muscle tissue, and tiny clustered globules of yellowish fat. Huge puncture wounds are gored deep in her broken, chewed apart neck. My first thought is shark attack, but then I note the raking quality of the gouges all up and down her poor flesh—no, not gouges, make that *claw marks*—and I realize there's simply no way a shark's teeth could have done that.

Justine looks like she's been savaged by a werewolf—or hacked apart by razor-fingered Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies.

Poor, sweet, squirrelly Wormy Girl... I think to myself. *She must've been so scared when it happened.*

Pam runs up beside me after beaching the kayak. She's spent time with Justine on many occasions, so this is personal for her, too. "Is that Justine?" she asks me, already knowing the answer. "*Omigod, Derek, tell me that's not Justine!*" She starts to gag and has to turn away so she won't throw up.

Sand fleas and green bottle flies are crawling and buzzing all over Justine's body, amassing in the open wounds. Her Wormy Girl nickname is in the process of becoming much more literal. She's been out here since yesterday, I'm guessing. She must have been in the water first and then washed up on the shore, because there's no blood in the sand—and no footprints aside from our own. I'm not a forensic pathologist, though, so I can't say anything with absolute certainty.

Pam has a grip on herself now. "Should we call 911?" she asks, holding her forearms close under her breasts, as if she's suddenly turned cold.

I get my iPhone out of my shorts. I'm not seeing any reception bars, but I try anyway. By some miracle, the call goes through. I have a hard time explaining to the dispatcher where we are, but she finally says there's a Harbor Patrol boat nearby. She'll send that.

The Harbor Patrol shows up a few minutes later in a long, flat-bottomed boat painted sky blue with a big **68** on the side. Three muscle-bound alpha-males climb out of it wearing oversized mirrorshades and black baseball hats with **MORRO BAY HARBOR PATROL** stitched on them in white. Aside from those accessories, they're not wearing uniforms—just random polo shirts and athletic shorts. Two of the three have cheesy cop mustaches.

“You’re Derek?” one of them asks me. I tell him I am and introduce Pam. I’ve probably seen all three of these guys around the docks before, but I don’t know their names.

I lead them over to Justine’s corpse. They stand around gawking at her. Two of them squat for a better look, like apes in their own private jungle. Then they start peppering me with questions. I tell them what I know. One of them puts a brawny arm around Pam and leads her away right after the others start grilling me about my “relationship to the deceased.” I’ve only heard that awkward phrase used on cop shows like *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *CSI: Miami*, but here it is, coming to me live in Morro Bay. I wonder if they picked up the lingo from TV, or if they were actually taught to say stupid shit like that in California Harbor Patrol School.

I don’t like being separated from Pam. These guys are starting to bug me. They’ve obviously decided I’m the prime suspect in what appears to be a murder case, since I had breakfast with “the deceased” yesterday and then conveniently “discovered her remains” today. I’m thinking to myself that it wasn’t even my idea to go kayaking this morning—but I don’t tell them that. I don’t want to deflect their suspicions onto Pam.

Finally, they tell me we can take our rented kayak back to the Kayak Shack, where a police officer will meet us and arrange to get our full statements. They advise me not to take any detours—as if we could use a two-person kayak to flee the scene and escape justice.

Pam comes back to our little group, looking askance at the guy who was questioning her. When we get back into the kayak, I feel like a petulant little boy in soggy short pants riding the marine equivalent of a toy tricycle as we paddle away from the big, burbling Harbor Patrol boat. It doesn’t help that the guy who interviewed Pam gets us going by freeing the kayak’s stern from the beach with a shove.

“*Wheeeee!*” I could swear I heard him say, under his breath.

“I can’t believe it! That asshole tried to hit on me!” Pam fumes once we’re out of earshot. “Our friend’s lying there dead

and that fucking creep asks me out on a date.” In a huffy, cartoon gorilla voice, she mimics his come-on line: “*Your boyfriend might be a murderer....*”

“I wonder if we can report him for that,” I say. My eidetic memory calls up an image of the guy’s huge biceps. If I challenged him to a fight, I doubt I could take him. A lawsuit seems like the better option.

“I’d *never* go out with a jerk like that,” says Pam, waving a hand as if to dismiss him. “I’ll bet he’s one of those guys who tries to do anal without telling you first.”

“You’ll never catch *me* doing that...” I say, emphasizing my gentlemanly qualities. “If you ever feel me knocking at your back door, it’s just errant targeting. Your pussy doesn’t exactly glow in the dark, y’know.”

“I can’t believe this!” Pam says, semi-hysterical. “Justine just got mauled to death, and we’re talking about butt-fucking?”

“Hey, you started it...” I say in my defense, but I feel bad. *She’s right*, I think. *Where’s my head?* “We’re both probably suffering from post-traumatic stress,” I say, trying to mollify her.

“And those guys were assholes! Were they even real cops?”

“I’m not sure how the Harbor Patrol works,” I admit. “I always thought they just towed broken-down boats and went looking for lost surfers. I don’t think you have to be a cop for that.”

“No—just a macho, power-tripping dipshit.” Pam slaps the water with her paddle. “God, this whole thing has been beyond creepy. When I was alone with that guy I kept looking over my shoulder, thinking we were about to get attacked by Bigfoot.”

“That didn’t even occur to me—that the killer might come back.”

“It looked like an animal did it, don’t you think? Like a bear or a mountain lion. Do we have any bears here?”

“Not that I know of.”

Quietly, trying to keep it all in, Pam starts crying. I lean forward to hug her, but it's awkward in a kayak. I'm afraid we'll tip over. Finally, she leans back into me and I kiss the tears away from her cheek.

"Oh, Derek," she whimpers, "I know she was nuts and she talked about suicide all the time, but you don't think Justine could've done that to herself, do you?"

"No way," I say, convinced of that much, at least. "If Justine was going to take herself out, she would've done it in the most pain-free, least bloody way possible. She was considerate like that—to herself and others."

"Remember how I said this was the perfect day? Right before we found her?" Pam turns and kisses me on the lips.

I *do* remember, of course. I'd felt it, too: a certain giddiness, a feeling that everything was coming together. It was one of those days when the breeze feels like a warm caress on your skin and the sun is your friend and the sky is an infinite dome of ecstatic blue—when every molecule of you and your surroundings feels interconnected in a pulsing web of happiness. Those days are rare. You can't force them. But we had one this morning and it felt like we were in love with the world—and the world, for a brief moment, loved us in return.

I kiss Pam and hold her tight. "I remember..." I say when we come up for air.

"Well, I meant it. It *was* perfect..." Pam says. "The seals, that surly little sea otter, those crazy pelicans... all of it was just perfect. But Justine was already dead when I said that. Maybe she was coaxing things along for us from the Other Side, *trying* to make it a perfect day, because she knew what we'd be dealing with later."

"Seems far-fetched..." I say.

"You wrote something about that once, in one of your books. *Remember?* How people who've died try to help the people they left behind. Maybe that's why you had all those book sales all of a sudden. Justine was probably dead when *that* was happening, too."

“Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

“Hey, you wrote it, not me.”

“Yeah, but that was *fiction*. This is real life.”

Much later—after they take our statements down at the Morro Bay police station; after I make a long, sad, New York phone call to my brother, Crash, to tell him what happened—Pam and I will look up that passage together. It’s on page 148 of my first book, *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg*. I didn’t remember it very well because I’d written it over a decade ago. Besides, sometimes my writing doesn’t really feel like it’s mine. On odd occasions, I seem to channel certain passages. When that happens, it’s almost as if some otherworldly entity is whispering between my ears. My only job then is to get it all down in a Word document, as fast as I possibly can.

This was one of those passages. The narrator is an embryonic me, observing *Crash Gordon*’s fictional landscape from a time-transcendent perch inside my metafictional mother’s womb—a vantage point that supposedly straddles the whole of earthly life and the strange wisdom to be found on the Other Side.

This is what I transcribed:

See, here’s the thing about death: we’re all suicides, in a sense. We all plot the course of our lives before we incarnate, and along that course we always designate the exit points. Most lives have more than one.

So say you’re driving along Highway 1 through Big Sur in a neat little sports car and some cutesy-pie woodland creature darts out in front of you, maybe a self-absorbed raccoon. You swerve to avoid hitting it. The car skids, the front bumper clips a guardrail, the steering wheel wrenches hard to one side. Then something goes horribly wrong. You find yourself airborne, somersaulting through clear blue sky, tumbling down an iceplant-covered embankment. A rocky shore at low tide fills the windshield. It shatters in your face. You’ve arrived at your self-designated exit point. Every task you’ve set for yourself has been accomplished—or attempted and botched.

Or maybe not. Maybe there's still more for you to do. So you run right over that raccoon and keep going: heading to New York, getting married, writing books, adopting two beautiful, laughing baby girls from China.... It could be anything. The main thing is, you don't look back. If you pass one exit point, there's always another one further up the road. Every human body is like an unlaunched rocket, waiting to hurtle you through death to the Other Side.

Be grateful for that. We all need an escape plan. Because incarnating in this world is like a descent into hell. Those of us from the Other Side only do it because we love you. It's almost embarrassing to admit, but that's the big, sappy secret:

The dead love you.

Life on Earth is so full of cruel pressures that almost everyone ends up a little damaged. No one escapes, really. Some totally cave in—they howl and prance and slay, committing acts of depravity wherever they go, so the world can see them for the demented souls they've truly become. Others, more cunning, might command acts far more heinous in the name of God or democracy. But absolutely everyone is in the same trap—the high school janitor and the secretary of state, Presidents of great nations and run-of-the-mill schizophrenics, stay-at-home moms and Islamic terrorists. Only when they die do they figure out that we're all one. Every single thing in the whole universe—and beyond—is interconnected. No one can be at peace until we're all at peace. And that realization creates an enormous sense of compassion in the newly departed for those still left behind on Earth. Or let's just call it what it really is: love. The dead love you. God loves you (whatever your conception of God might be). You are loved, in spite of everything. Get that through your head. It's important.

Often, it's the newly dead who end up taking the biggest risks for those they've left behind. Any spirit or guardian angel can intervene on behalf of the living to make their lives a little better, but for the most part, the longer the dead stay on the Other Side, the more conservative they tend to get. Like I've said, it's nice there. The (non-)living is easy. They start to think like slaves under a kind new master, worried they'll be sold back to humanity. So they end up doing nothing—trying to shove the turmoil of man's world out of their thoughts, deliberately

forgetting how bad things are down there. Which is why most guardian angels are kind of crappy. And why you'll find, in the lives of the famous or exceedingly fortunate, that they also saw a lot of tragedy—a lot of people died around them. Fame or good fortune usually requires a blood sacrifice. It's not witchcraft. It's just life—and the brand-new opposite of life, doing what it can to provide.

So is Justine up there pulling angelic strings for us? According to my own book, she might be doing exactly that. I've often thought that Justine knew my books better than I do—*so why not?*

After Harry Houdini died he was supposed to give a sign to his friends that he continued to exist on the Other Side. According to Harry's friends, he never got through.

But maybe Justine did.

CAT PEOPLE A-GO-GO

I'm not proud of this, but later that same day—after a melancholy dinner at the Harmony Pasta Factory—I ask Pam to come over to my place to watch the movie *Cat People*. Not the lurid 1982 softcore europorn remake starring Nastassja Kinski (with David Bowie howling on the soundtrack about “*Putting out fire / With gas-o-line!*”). Instead, I suggest we watch the original 1942 version, starring Simone Simon, in classic black-and-white.

“Why would I want to do that?” Pam asks me, semi-horrified by the idea. “I can’t think of a worse movie to watch, after what just happened.”

“I think we have some unresolved issues to discuss,” I say, giving her a hug. “*Cat People* might help ‘facilitate dialogue’ between us, like those New Age shrinks at Esalen are always saying.”

“Y’think?” Pam looks skeptical. “All right...” she sighs, “I’ll give it a shot. But if it starts getting too intense, you have to turn it off, okay?”

“I promise.”

Back at my place, we take Trout out for a late-night walk and then we settle down with a bowl of Costco butter-flavored popcorn and a bottle of Paso Robles Pinot Grigio. Trout curls

up on the end of the couch, resting his head on my lap. He'll end up eating most of the popcorn. The *penne alla vodka* from the Harmony Pasta Factory has left us both feeling full and Trout knows I'm a soft touch when it comes to feeding him snacks. Pam says I'm corrupting him, but he still hasn't turned into one of those obnoxious dogs that beg all the time, despite her fear of that happening.

I use the remote to download a double feature of *Cat People* and *The Curse of the Cat People* from Netflix and we dive right in.

On its most basic level, *Cat People* is a story about a neurotic Serbian woman who's afraid she'll turn into a giant panther if she has an orgasm. The movie is much more nuanced than that, of course—but that's the gist of it. In the 1982 remake, as I recall, Nastassja Kinski was a werecat who would turn into a ferocious black jaguar every time she screwed (unless she boffed her brother, Malcolm McDowell, who was also a cat person); then she'd have to kill and eat somebody to turn back into a human. But the 1942 version doesn't go that far. It's all shadows and suggestion, topped off with a big, heaping dollop of Freudianism. It's a bit hokey, compared to modern movies, but in light of the earlier events of our day, Pam and I find it fascinating.

When the movie is over, I delicately broach the subject I've been meaning to ask her about all along:

"So... *erhm*... this is kind of awkward..." I say, taking her hand in mine, "but did you, *uhm*, ever happen to notice that your mom's eyes kind of look like cat eyes at certain points during that film you made in college?"

Pam throws her head back starts laughing her ass off.

"What? What's so funny?"

"*You!*" Pam has a good laugh: it's genuine and loud. "Did you really think"—putting a hand to her brow—"oh shit... did you really think my mom was a werecat? And, oh god, *oh wait*..." She pauses to catch her breath. "You must've thought I was a werecat, too! *Holy fuck!*" She mock-angrily turns and slugs my arm. "Did you actually think I could've killed Justine?"

“Never crossed my mind,” I say, lying through my teeth.

“You bastard! You *did*, didn’t you?”

“No way, babe...” I say, putting my throbbing arm around her waist. “But you have to admit, those cat eyes on Paithoon are a little freaky.”

“I did that myself, using Adobe After Effects,” says Pam. I can detect a note of pride creeping into her voice. “There’s an old Thai legend about ghost tigers that take human form to seduce their victims. *Suea Saming*, they’re called.”

“And you thought you’d just work that into your movie somehow?”

“My mom used to tell me stories about all the Thai ghosts when I was growing up. The werecrocodiles were the worst. They had diamond teeth. They used to scare the crap out of me. I thought I had one living under my bed.”

“Gee, thanks, Mom... nice bedtime story.”

“Yeah, well, a part of me enjoyed being scared and I was always after her to tell me more. Of all the ghosts, I liked the *Suea Saming* best. The weretiger. It would turn itself into beautiful naked girl, bathing in a forest stream. And then, when some stupid horny man showed up and tried to rape her, she’d turn back into a tiger and shred his sorry ass.”

“*Sweet!*”

“Yeah, I thought it was the perfect ghost for my mom. So I put the cat eyes in there. Tigers don’t really have eyes like that, with the slits, but I had to do something to suggest that cat-like nature, so that’s what I came up with.”

“You did a good job,” I tell her. “I thought it might be real. Seeing it gave me goosebumps.”

“Why didn’t you ever ask me about it before?”

“I don’t know... I guess I thought you might’ve been insulted if I said your mom was some sort of shape-shifting cat-demon.”

“I would’ve taken it as a compliment.”

“Now I know....”

“Now you know. But you should’ve known before—especially about me. I mean, how many orgasms have I had with you? *Hundreds*, at least. And did I ever turn into a man-eating Panther Girl afterwards? I don’t think so.”

“Maybe you did it while I was sleeping,” I say, kidding her. “Or maybe you’ve been faking your orgasms with me all along, and you only turn into Panther Girl after you masturbate with a magic dildo. You could be frigid, for all I know.”

“There’s only one way to find out...” says Pam, standing up. She tugs on my hand, leading me toward the bedroom. “You’ll have to stay up all night, but you’re a stud—I know you can do it.”

“I might need some Viagra,” I say, dragging my feet.

“Like hell you do. All you need is me.”

She’s right about that.



In the morning, Pam is still Pam. I don’t see any bloody feline tracks anywhere. Our Keystone Cops version of the *Kama Sutra* went on all night—and now I’m thoroughly exhausted—but I’m happy in the knowledge that my girlfriend is definitively not a werecat.

We decide to have breakfast at Rosa’s Shark Shack as a morbid way of honoring Justine’s ghost. When we get there, I ask Barb the Waitress to seat us at the same table on the deck where Justine and I sat the other day. On our way out, I ask her if she’s heard the news.

“I heard,” Barb says, shaking her head. “It’s all anyone talks about. That poor woman. She was hard on your brother, but *still*—nobody deserves to die like that.”

“Yeah. It was pretty gruesome,” I say. “We’re the ones who found her.”

“Could you tell what did it? People are saying it must’ve been a grizzly.”

“Since when do we have grizzlies in Morro Bay?” I ask her.

“I don’t know... a cougar then? Hiding out in the heron preserve?” Barb hands us menus as we sit down.

“That makes more sense,” says Pam. “But what was Justine doing walking around out in the heron preserve?”

“Who knows? She was always a little loony—that one. Not to speak ill of the dead.”

“Yeah, let’s not speak ill...” I say, kind of annoyed that Barb is still holding a grudge.

She takes the hint. “House Specials today are Eggs Benedict and Sour Cream Blintzes with Powdered Sugar on top,” she says, clicking her pen. “I’d stay away from the Eggs Benedict. That Hollandaise sauce was looking a little iffy this morning.”

“Thanks, Barb.”

“Yeah, thanks,” says Pam. “I really like a waitress who helps me avoid food poisoning.”

“We like to see return customers around here. Not killing them helps.”

My eye is drawn to the red Hatchetman tattoo on Barb’s left bicep as she says that. *Could she have...?* The thought flickers through my mind, but then I think: *No. There’s no way.*

Funny how a friend’s mysterious death has a way of turning everyone into a murder suspect.

“Take your time deciding,” says Barb. “I’ll check back in a few minutes.” She hesitates, as if she wants to ask me something, but then she tucks her pen behind her ear and goes away.

“I’m sensing a little competitive jealousy there,” says Pam, once Barb is gone. “Does that waitress have a thing for you?”

“For my brother,” I tell her. “Barb used to be hot for Crash about thirty years ago. Justine, I guess, was in the way. Or at least that’s how *Barb* saw it. I doubt Crash would’ve dated her.”

“Poor thing. Waiting tables must suck when you get to be her age. Only kids should do it.”

“She was young when she started. She just stuck with it. So I guess she must like it—or parts of it, at least.”

“It’s a pretty funky place,” Pam says, looking around at the zippered plastic windows and homely Doug-fir deck. “Why haven’t we come here before?”

“I always thought it was a little too low-rent and divey for a date with you. I usually just come here by myself.”

“And with Justine...” Pam points out. “Was this your secret rendezvous spot?”

“She was only here with me the one time. Barb hadn’t seen her since she used to come here with Crash, way back when.”

“You don’t think Barb could’ve...” Pam raises an eyebrow.

“No. Her hackles stood up when she saw Justine, but she didn’t get her claws out, if you know what I mean.”

“Maybe that happened later.”

Maybe it did, but I’m not convinced yet.

YALDABAOTH LETS IT RIP

To: **Jeb Beezos** <jbeezos@glamazon.com>

From: Yaldabaoth <yaldabaoth@archonsrus.com>

Re: Pesky Authors

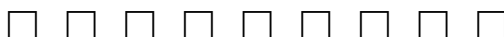
January 19, 2015 at 8:46 AM

Hey J,

We should talk about how the Swannson plan is progressing. Unbeknownst to you, I've been working behind the scenes to further our agenda. One example: I discovered our pet author was close to someone who would have helped him navigate the ego-warping latitudes of fame and fortune. So I took her out (nature stroll, mountain lion). Now I'm wondering what to do about his girlfriend. Call me.

The Devil You Know,

Y



“Holy shit... so you killed someone, huh?”

“Not me. A mountain lion.”

“Which you, *uhm*, happened to send her way.”

“I might have nudged both parties toward a predesignated meeting place. But after that, nature took its course.”

“That’s all it takes?”

“People die every day, Jay-B. It’s not hard for someone like me to hasten their departure.”

“So why don’t you do that to Derek Swannson?”

“We already went over that.”

“But I checked: Glamazon’s the only place he’s selling his books. If you sicced a cougar on him, we could de-list his titles and that’d be the end of it.”

“You’re underestimating the Invisible College. I can assure you, that *wouldn’t* be the end of it. The books exist. They’re already distributed throughout the world. We can’t destroy them all. All we can do is destroy their author’s reputation.”

“It seems like we’re going about it the wrong way. Have you seen how many books he’s sold in the last week?”

“I knew he’d get big numbers once people found out about him. It’s pains me to see it happen, but it’s the only way forward.”

“Has he done anything yet to mess up his reputation?”

“He got shitfaced on margaritas last night and projectile vomited on his girlfriend’s dog. But the girlfriend and the dog have already forgiven him.”

“So he’s a lush?”

“I had a bartender spike his drink. I was hoping for a repeat of Ted Kennedy’s Chappaquiddick incident, but the girlfriend took charge and let him spend the night at her place.”

“So your plan is to kill the girlfriend and blame it on him?”

“Just an idea I’m toying with... I haven’t made my final decision yet. His love for her is what makes him vulnerable. Which is why I thought we should talk.”

“We’re talking. How I can help?”

“I’ve heard *VanityWeek* owes you a favor.”

“Most magazines owe me a favor, after what I’ve done for their digital subscription numbers with the Kindler.”

“Yes, but *VanityWeek* is the one I want you to approach. We need a high visibility weekly with a gullible readership. I have a specific cover image in mind for them. We’ll need a good Photoshop artist.”

“I have plenty of Photoshop artists working for me already. I know just the guy.”

“Good. We’ll need one of the very best. And discretion is a must. You’ll have to get him to sign a non-disclosure agreement and then enforce it by monitoring his phone and email.”

“Sounds like a job for the NSA.”

“The Bewlay Brothers can help with the monitoring. You know Iggy and Colin, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah, I know those two. Used to be a CIA assassins, right?”

“Right. That’s how we met. But they aged out. Their reflexes got too slow, so now they sit around in an office at Kroll all day, staring at computer monitors.”

“Colin Bewlay told me once that he could kill me with a pencil. Just joking around, I hope.”

“That’s an old G. Gordon Liddy line. Colin’s a technology geek, like you. He’d never use anything so crude as a pencil. But there’s no doubt he could’ve killed you, if you’d been in the same room with him.”

“Creepy guys.”

“But loyal to our side. You have no reason to fear them.”

“Still—”

“Okay, so you arrange things with the Photoshop artist and I’ll pass his name along to the Bewlay Brothers. After they give us the go-ahead, I’ll send you the images and instructions, which you can forward to the artist. Then, after I approve the final artwork, you’ll have to persuade *VanityWeek* to run our cover.”

“Are you sure I have to be involved in all this mundane bullshit? It sounds like stuff I could delegate. I’m sort of busy right now, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Time isn’t linear for me, as you well know. I can see all future outcomes. And believe me, this situation takes precedence over anything else you might think is important. We’re trying to avert a cosmic catastrophe for the Dark Brotherhood here. Even Glamazon isn’t immune to the consequences, if we should fail.”

“Well, when you put it that way....”

“So you’ll do the job yourself?”

“Already on it.”

“Good. We’ll also need the services of a New York literary agent. I was thinking I’d get in touch with my old friend, Andrew Wylie, but I’m open to suggestions, if you know someone.”

“Wylie? I can’t stand that douche. You know what he said? ‘If you have a choice between the plague and Glamazon, pick the plague!’ So fuck him. Have you met Joan Wisner?”

“Of course. We worked together on the O.J. book.”

“Well, I always enjoy doing business with Joan. Fun lady.”

“*Hmm*. Let me mull that over. I’ll get back to you.”

“Okay, Y... anything else?”

“Get out of the diaper business. You’re eating into my girl Jessica Alba’s profits. I told her I’d talk to you about it.”

“Fine. Those Glamazon Soft & Cozy Diapers are an embarrassment, anyway. Customer complaints say the liquefied shit is just flyin’ right out of ’em.”

“Not unlike other areas in your life, if we don’t get this Swannson situation under control.”

BEER AND LOATHING IN CAYUCOS

Man, those were some strong margaritas.... I'd almost forgotten what it's like to wake up and still be drunk. The first thing I notice is how relaxed my muscles feel. I'm a light sleeper—I do a lot of tossing and turning in bed, trying to get comfortable. Not this morning. Aside from some mild queasiness, I'm quite comfortable right where I am. But where am I? It takes me a moment to figure it out: Pam's apartment. That comes as a shock. I can't remember how I got here.

Pam isn't with me. I should probably get up and look for her, but every muscle in my body feels too lazy to move. I'm kind of surprised I'm still breathing. My mind, in contrast, is a skittering spider weaving together half-remembered scenes and spiky, self-loathing reproaches. *God, did I really do that? And that? Shit....* Each embarrassing scene from last night hits me like a jolt from a Taser, shocking me into a pervasive feeling of humiliation.

I remember picking up a to-go order of smoked albacore tacos from Ruddell's SmokeHouse in Cayucos. Pam was with me. We decided to eat the tacos down the street at the Old Cayucos Tavern, where they serve tasty frozen lime margaritas in oversized beer mugs. So far, so good—nothing we hadn't done before. But I probably shouldn't have ordered that second margarita. At some point, everything around me went blurry,

except for Pam's beautiful face. Then I had to squint one eye to keep her face from going double on me. I told her it was probably time for us to leave. "Why?" she asked. She was having a good time. When I tried to stand up, everything tilted and I staggered into an empty table, almost knocking it over. "Oh, *that's* why..." I heard Pam say.

Then we were outside. The world had become a carnival ride. I could actually *feel* the Earth spinning on its axis like a planetary Tilt-A-Whirl, pinning me to its surface with nausea-inducing centripetal force. I fell to my knees on the sidewalk, almost taking Pam down with me. (I lift up the bedsheet to take a look at my bruised and scraped kneecaps... *yep—that happened.*)

After that, I must have gone into a walking blackout. The next thing I remember is Trout coming out on the balcony to say hello when Pam opened the door to her apartment. Trout's preferred mode of greeting me, when I'm standing, is to stick his head between my legs so I can lean over and pet his shoulders and the lower part of his back, just above his tail. (It's a dog thing... if I pet him just right it gets his tail rotating like a furry propeller.) Anyway, Trout came up to me like nothing was wrong, but I must have lurched or in some other way thrown off his game, because he ended up head-butting me right in the nuts. I doubled over, my mouth flew open, and a cascade of tangy lime green barf spattered across poor Trout's back.

Oh fuck.

I crumpled against the balcony's wrought iron railing, barely able to hold myself up. My stomach was churning like a bag full of salted garden slugs. Another torrent of margarita slush and smoked albacore taco chunks gushed out of me into the courtyard below. Then the dry heaves set in: I horked up thick, mucousy strings of bile as my guts twisted and writhed. My eyes were watering like crazy. Vomity slime was dangling off my chin. I had to wipe it away. And the worst thing about it was that I knew Pam was standing there, watching me the whole time.

What an asshole... she must have been thinking.

She should have just left me out there—sprayed me down with a garden hose and then locked the front door. I wouldn't have blamed her. I thought there was a good chance she'd break up with me for puking on her dog.

Pam loves that dog. So do I. Trout doesn't deserve to be puked on. I sit up in Pam's bed, holding my head in shame, and let out a long groan.

"Hey, you're finally up," says Pam, entering the bedroom with a lager glass full of reddish-brown liquid. "Are you feeling okay? You were really hammered last night."

I check her expression to see if she's being friendly or mean. She's smiling—a good sign.

"God, I'm so sorry..." I say. "I feel like such a dickhead. Is Trout all right?"

"I haven't seen any signs of lasting trauma."

Trout appears in the doorway behind Pam. He tilts his head and stares at me with his quizzical blue and golden eyes. Then he jumps up on the bed and sits down next to me. He plants a forepaw on my chest—his way of telling me he expects some pats. As I happily oblige, Trout bends over to lick the tip of my nose like it's a scoop of ice cream. All is forgiven.

"He smells like he's had a bath," I say.

"Duh," says Pam. "I washed him with tomato juice."

"Like when a skunk sprays you?"

"Actually, it was a can of V-8. All it did was make him smell like rancid lasagna. So then I had to use my good shampoo."

"You're such a great dog. I didn't mean to puke on you, buddy," I murmur into Trout's silky ear. He wraps the bendy part of his front leg around my forearm—Trout's version of a dog handshake. *We're good*, he seems to be telling me.

Greatest. Dog. Ever.

"Here—drink up." Pam passes me the lager glass. "It's V-8 and beer. It'll help with your hangover."

"I'm not feeling that bad, actually," I tell her, but I take a swig, anyway. I'm definitely thirsty. "Thank you," I say after doing a gut check to make sure the V-8 and beer is going to stay down. My stomach is giving me the go-ahead. I drain the rest of the glass in a few gulps.

Pam sits down on the bed next to me. "There's something we need to talk about..." she says.

Uh-oh. I look down and away to avoid her *this-is-serious* gaze. The sheets on Pam's bed are dark blue, almost purplish, and I've just noticed that they're mottled with dried cumstains. *Not mine.* I haven't been inside Pam's bedroom in months. My scalp prickles and a tomatoey acid reflux rises in my throat.

"I need to brush my teeth first—" I manage to get out as my mouth floods with warm spit.

Pam says, "I'll bet..." kind of coughing that last word out.

I'm already spidering across the bed toward her bathroom.

"There's a new toothbrush in the drawer under the sink," she calls after me. "I keep a bunch in there for guests."

What kind of guests? I wonder. *And if they're overnight guests, how many?* I envision tag-teams, orgies. I barely manage to get the door shut before I fling back the toilet seat and put my head over the bowl so I can throw up.

Aside from a torrent of drool, nothing comes out.

Here I am, sick as a dog, and my girlfriend is fucking other guys, I think to myself. Just another routine existential observation on Planet Suck—some other planet's version of hell.

After a while, it becomes apparent that I'm not going to barf. I stand up and take a look at myself in the mirror. I don't like what I see. Dark raccoonish circles have bloomed around my eyes. The creases in my face have deepened from dehydration. I also have a severe case of bedhead. I'm probably skirting an all-time low, looks-wise.

No wonder Pam is hooking up with someone else, I think to myself. *I'm a loser. I don't deserve her.*

I brush my teeth, splash water on my face. I need to steel myself for what comes next. “There’s something we need to talk about....” *How many break-ups have started with those exact words?* I wonder.

When I go back out, Pam is still sitting on the bed. There’s a huge cumstain on the rumpled sheet next to her bare knee. She’s wearing a low-cut summery dress patterned with hyacinths and vines, looking lovely, as always. But that’s the trouble with dating really beautiful girls: they always have plenty of options. There’s always a bigger dog sniffing around—some guy with a crazy amount of money, a better career, a more impressive physique, dazzling social connections, and/or a porno-sized prick. The potential partner upgrades are almost limitless for a beautiful girl with Pam’s intelligence and warmth.

I’m going to miss her so fucking much.

“So are we breaking up?” I ask her, point-blank.

“What?” Pam looks startled. “God, *no!* Why would you even think that?”

I feel like I’ve been caught sleeping in a burning house and the bedroom door is too hot to touch, but I’m about to open it, anyway. I wordlessly point to the stain beside Pam’s knee.

“What are you...?” Then it dawns on her. “Oh. *Shit!* Okay, look, that’s not what you think.”

“What is it then?”

“You know I’m a slob, right? That’s why we never spend any time here. Your place is so much neater than mine—*more adult.*”

That much is true. Pam’s living room has been completely taken over by the set for her UTube channel. It’s a jumbled mess of hot lights, video equipment, computers, monitors, and cables snaking all over the place. A recreation of the Jumbo’s Clown Room stage—complete with stripper pole—sits right in the middle of everything. Pam never cleans up or puts anything away. There’s barely enough room to walk around in there.

"Lately, I've been eating a lot of ice cream in bed," she tells me. "I always give Trout the last spoonful—because he loves it—but he's a messy eater. And he drools a lot."

"So that's dog drool?"

"And green tea ice cream. Look closer. It's green, I swear."

"That could just mean you've been banging the Jolly Green Giant," I joke. She's right: the stains are tinted a dusky shade of green. I'm so relieved.

"Right... my Jolly Green Lover... we met on eHarmony and bonded over flash-frozen broccoli," Pam says with a quick, condescending smile. "His jolly green cock is, like, fourteen feet long and every night I just beg and beg for it. I especially love it when I get to deepthroat him from across the street. I think we have a real shot at living happily ever after."

"There's no need to get crude," I say.

"God, Derek, you can be so clueless sometimes! Don't you know how much I love you?"

"You could do a lot better than me."

"Really? How? Because I don't see it that way."

"With your looks and brains, you could marry a billionaire hedge fund manager who's not afraid of a little housework."

"Now you're insulting me. You think that's what I want?"

"Isn't that what every woman wants? Didn't Freud write a book about that? I think it was called *Using Your Feminine Wiles to Bag a Rich Guy*."

"Oh, I get it... we're picking at scabs from your busted-up marriage again, aren't we?"

I shrug. She has me nailed and I don't have the energy to brazen it out. "Okay, so maybe you're right," I admit. "But I just had a major freakout in your bathroom. I thought you were about to dump me because you were screwing someone else."

"No way. I should be more worried about that than you. After all, it was your fellow male, Hart Crane, who compared

love to ‘a burnt match skating in a urinal.’ Once the sexual novelty has worn off a relationship, you guys just piss all over us women.”

“Figuratively speaking....”

“Yeah, *figuratively*—unless you’re into watersports.”

“Uhm, no.”

“So try to wrap your head around this, smart guy: I *like* being with you. You won’t lose me unless you want me to get lost.” Pam pats the cumstain next to her that’s really a dog-drooled ice cream stain. I sit down on it and she puts her arm across my shoulder blades. “You’re my best friend,” she says, “a *real* friend, not just an acquaintance, like pretty much everyone else I’ve met since high school. The concept of friendship is so devalued these days, with Facebook and Instagram and all that crap, but I know a true friend when I come by one. And speaking of coming, we’re way more than just sexually compatible... you’re, like, my perfect match in that department. Do you know how rare that is, to find those two things—a good friend and a good lover—when you’re dating men?”

“I have to claim ignorance there,” I say. “I haven’t dated a lot of men.”

“Well, I have, and let me tell you: most men are selfish, controlling pricks—especially the ones who are rich, or good in bed. They pretend to be nice guys at first, but if you hang around them long enough, you find out the truth.”

I don’t like thinking about Pam’s sexual history before she met me, but there’s no deluding myself that she was a virgin that whole time. I guess the upside of experience is that she knows what she *doesn’t* want in a relationship.

“A lot of women are the same way, once you get to know them...” I say. “That’s why I don’t have a lot of friends. It’s hard to concentrate around people who only want you thinking about their own petty problems and bullshit vendettas.”

“I know: right? But you don’t do that. You let me be me. You’ve always let me have sovereignty—over my career, over the way I choose to live—which is something that none of those boys

at Cal Arts ever would've allowed. With them, it was always their art that had to come first, and I was just supposed to be in awe of their brilliance and shut up and suck their dicks."

"Well, not to excuse them, but they were young. And I recall a similar episode of 'boyfriend maintenance' not too long ago."

"That's different. When I go down on you, it's because I want to, not because you think you're so brilliant that you deserve it."

"So I'm *not* brilliant and I *don't* deserve it."

"No! Stop! You know what I mean.... Your books, and those houses you design, they're totally amazing—way better than any college boy's crappy po-mo art project. Really, I should be sucking your dick more often."

"You should," I agree (somewhat selfishly), without insisting. "And by the way, you're doing a really great fluff job on me right now. But let's not forget about my flaws as a boyfriend. I mean, throwing up on Trout here wasn't exactly classy."

Trout thumps his tail upon hearing his name. He's resting on top of the king-sized pillow I was using earlier. I turn around and give him some pats.

"Everybody pukes. That's one of the joys of being human," Pam says. "But that's also kind of what I wanted to talk to you about before you freaked out on me: I've never seen you as drunk as you were last night."

"Yeah, I was not magnificent. We've already established that."

"No, it was *not* your finest hour. But I had one of those margaritas myself—and I was barely buzzed. You're a lot bigger than I am. You should've been able to handle two, easy. I've seen you do it before. So either your liver has taken a serious dive all of a sudden, or someone tried to poison you last night."

"Y'think?" That hadn't even occurred to me.

"Yeah. I think we should stay away from the Old Cayucos Tavern for a while. You might have an enemy there."

“I think tequila might be my enemy. I’m sticking to beer from now on.”

“Good plan. And hey, while we’re on the subject of enemies... have you seen the latest comments on my UTube channel?” Pam leans over and picks up a MacBook from the floor beside her bed.

“I almost never read those,” I confess. The one-star reviews directed at my own books are bad enough. Reading a bunch of anonymous hate-spewing rants about my girlfriend puts me into a simmering rage that ruins my entire day.

Pam flips open the MacBook and presses the start button. “I’m getting death threats now,” she says. No emotion—just a statement of fact.

“Because you talk about Chris Kraus and Jack Sarfatti? I don’t get it.”

“People are weird. The world is not a swell place. *We’ve already established that.*” She opens an Oogle Zone browser and goes to her latest UTube video—the one where she talks about *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus. As she scrolls down through the comments section I see several puerile references to how much Pam loves dick, or how she would squeal if she sat on the commenter’s big dick, and so on. No surprises there.

Pam is convinced that artists have to make themselves vulnerable if they want to have an impact on the world. She’s developed the thick skin necessary to follow through on that conviction. She still believes in the romantic idea that a lone artist or activist can strike a blow against the established order that will help change the world for the better—but only at the risk of public vilification, imprisonment, or even violent death. Her examples are Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Tolstoy, Dalton Trumbo, Jimi Hendrix, Lenny Bruce... the list goes on and on.

I’m much more thin-skinned than Pam. Just a few weeks ago I complained to her that someone named Tiffany Halliburton had given *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg* a one-star review on Goodreads that said: “Worst book ever.” I was kind of

bumped out about it until Pam clicked on Tiffany's name to look at the other books she'd reviewed. As it turned out, Tiffany had given a rave review to *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Women*, of which she wrote: "I think it's just wonderful. And it could be a little bit of a adults book to." Pam coolly observed that Tiffany was probably about eight years old and my writing was way beyond her reading comprehension level. But that hadn't stopped Tiffany from making her opinion of my book known to the world.

"Even little girls can be assholes..." said Pam, joking (maybe).

Here's what I think: we're only in this world for a fleeting interval, and then we're gone and the world forgets about us. Most people choose to waste their time by doing nothing special: just cooking and cleaning, going shopping, watching TV, maybe raising a few kids. Many of them feel trapped on an ever-spinning hamster wheel of earning and spending, working at jobs they hate for the sake of supporting a family. Others use up their time (and often die young) by pursuing their hedonistic passions, or addictions, in whatever ways they see fit. But the wisest expand their allotted time by becoming artists—because when you perceive the world as an artist, and interact with the world to create art, your consciousness expands and multiplies. Creating art brings the highest quality to your time on Earth by recapitulating some of your passing moments and preserving them beyond the limits of your physical incarnation.

Writing my first book took me six years, but it gave me a concentrated overview that helped me understand my brother's early life—and my own—in a unique way. If anyone is interested in that book, they can buy it for not much money—six years for six bucks—and read it in just a few days. Or a reviewer like Tiffany Halliburton can trash it in a few minutes.

It's the same for Pam: she'll spend weeks researching a topic she wants to know more about, and then she'll distill all that acquired knowledge into a 15-minute UTube clip. Anyone who wants to learn what she learned can skip the weeks of research and just watch her video for free (after spending fifteen seconds

watching a paid ad for Gatorade, Taco Bell, or whatever's being hyped on HBO that week).

Looked at from that angle, art not only brings heightened consciousness to its creators—it's also a gift to others. That's why it galls me when people go around bad-mouthing the artists they can't relate to, instead of just seeking out the best of the art that resonates with them on their own particular level of human consciousness. For some, Proust or Bach or Karl Ove Knausgaard has the most to say to them. For others, it's Captain Underpants.

Of course, I can't deny the fact that a lot of artists start out as self-aggrandizing narcissists. Many of them never evolve beyond that stage, and I'm sure that a lot of critics (often preening narcissists themselves) believe they're performing a public service by taking potshots at them. But one person's annoying egotist can be someone else's inspiring genius. History is rife with examples of once-scorned artists who were later canonized as masters of their chosen mediums. (The last several books by David Markson are particularly good at cataloging those discrepancies.) The world itself fosters many of the narcissistic delusions that go along with a career in the arts. For instance, when I was starting out as a writer, I somehow came to believe the handed-down notion that I'd be a hero and women would adore me if I could just get a story published in *The Paris Review*. I don't think that anymore.

Who the hell reads *The Paris Review*?

These days, I'm secure in the knowledge that I'm writing to reach a deeper understanding of the world and my place in it, rather than doing it for the sake of "sheer egoism"—the term George Orwell used in his 1946 essay "Why I Write" to describe his own early writerly motivations. (Elaborating on that theme, Orwell also listed: "Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc.") As the reviews trickle in for each new book that I publish, I now anticipate seeing more harsh criticism than praise, because I know I'm no longer even *attempting* to cater to mainstream tastes.

But a death threat... that's a whole new order of criticism that I haven't experienced yet—and I'm not at all comfortable with it being directed at my girlfriend.

“Someone should stab this cunt with a pitchfork and toss her in a lake of fire to get her to shut up. If no one else here is man enough to do it, I'll take on the job myself.”

That's Pam, reading the latest comment from someone calling himself Clonenhoof616. I don't know why I automatically assume it's a he, but I do.

“Isn't UTube supposed to filter out comments like that?” I ask her.

“That's how it usually works,” says Pam. “That's their policy. But somehow, this guy got through. Look, here's another one: *‘When my minions gang-rape you, you'll stay raped. You'll never walk again, slut.’*”

“Jesus. Is there anyone who can go after this guy? The FBI, maybe?”

“He's probably just some pimply high school kid jerking off in his bedroom,” Pam says with a sigh. “I don't think there's much I can do about it. I've already reported it to UTube.”

“Then why are his comments still up?”

“They're not. This is a screen grab. His comments are long gone. They just creeped me out so bad that I thought you should know about them. In case... well, let's not even go there.”

“Yeah, let's not. I hope you're right, though—that it's just some teenage jerk-off.”

“That makes the most sense, doesn't it? But it makes you wonder... why is there so much hate in the world?”

I lean in and hug Pam as tight as I can without hurting her. I say, “I think a lot of it comes from people who want to be loved, but aren't.”

“I'm glad that's not my problem,” she says. Then she adds: “And it's not your problem, either—even though sometimes you might think it is, you big dumbass.”

MOONSTONE, MURDER, AND MASTICATION

“Okay, now that’s just egregious...” Pam says, staring at the iMac in my living room a few days after my margarita meltdown.

“What’s egregious?” I ask, coming up behind her.

“Clonenhoof’s back. He’s ragging on my tits this time. He wrote: *‘I don’t get why this Underboob Selfie Queen is such a BFD. Milo Moiré has nicer jugs. I wouldn’t even bother to slice off Pam From Siam’s rack to hang as a trophy above my fireplace.’*”

“Well, at least he’s not threatening to murder or rape you this time,” I say. “He’s even willing to refrain from mutilation.”

Pam flashes me an ironic grin. “Yeah, I wouldn’t go so far as to say he’s chill, but he’s definitely mellowing.”

“Who’s Milo Moiré?”

“She’s this Swiss art chick who got some press by showing up naked at Art Basel last year. She also plopped some paint-filled eggs out of her twat during a performance piece at Art Cologne. Here—have a look....”

Pam pulls down a bookmark for Oogle Images and types in “Milo Moiré.” Thumbnails of a slender, busty nude woman instantly fill the browser window. Pam clicks on one of the thumbnails to enlarge it.

“Wow, she *does* have nice ones—although not as nice as yours, of course. Her nipples are too small for her, *uhm*, other proportions.”

“Oh yeah? Since when are you such a connoisseur of nipples, buster?”

“Just an aesthetic observation—I’m an architect, remember? Not to change the subject or anything, but did I happen to mention that I hit the 100-page mark in the new book I’ve been writing?”

“No. Congratulations!”

“I know it’s stupid. Unless you’re George R.R. Martin, no one cares if you write another book. Still, it feels important to me somehow.”

“Go, Derek! Should we do something to celebrate?”

“Like what?”

“Let’s make a painting,” Pam suggests. “I’ll pretend to be Milo Moiré and you can push eggs into my vagina.”

“I’ve got a better idea...” I say, taking her hand and leading her toward the bedroom.



“What should we do for dinner tonight?” I ask Pam while I lie flat on my back detumescing in tiny rhythmic twitches timed to the thumping of my heart. Our late afternoon lovemaking has really knocked the wind out of my penis.

“I’ll eat anywhere except the Old Cayucos Tavern,” Pam says, patting my sweaty stomach. “How about Robin’s, up in Cambria? Some Thai green curry might be nice.”

“Do you mind if I invite Skelly? I’ve been meaning to sit down with him to see how Doc Lindstrom’s house is coming along. I haven’t been out there in a while.”

“Fine by me. I like Skelly.”

Right after I text Skelly, he texts back to say he can meet us in Cambria around 7:30, so I call Robin's to make a reservation. After that, we take a quick shower, get dressed, feed and walk Trout, and then get in the Triumph for a leisurely thirty-minute trip up the coast along Highway 1. I let Pam drive, because she enjoys it. She's also a better driver than I am—more alert and focused, with quicker reflexes. I know it sounds unmanly to admit that, but it's true. Pam does a lot of things better than I do.

As we approach Cambria, a tall corridor of gnarled Monterey Pines rises above the highway. Vacation homes dot the lush green hillsides. I pick out one of the houses on top of a distant hill—a white stucco ranch job hemmed in by a split-rail fence—and I track it, closer and closer, taking in the structure's design, until I watch it glide past on the Triumph's right side. Then I pick out another house, farther up the road, and repeat the process. I get a weird visual thrill from doing that. I can't explain why. I used to do the same thing as a kid. Maybe that's why I became an architect.

We have some time to kill before dinner, so we decide to watch the sun go down over Moonstone Beach, at the northern end of Cambria's city limits. After Pam pulls into the parking lot, we leave our shoes in the Triumph and go walking along the edge of the surf. The water is winter-cold, but the pebbly sand is still warm from being exposed to the sun all day. It feels nice on our bare feet.

My brother, Crash, used to live in a cedar-shingled geodesic dome cabin that can still be seen at the top of a steep, kudzu-covered bluff overlooking Moonstone Beach Drive. I remember watching the most amazing sunsets from up there when I visited him in my teens. The place wasn't much more than a funky one-room redwood cave at the top of a nine-story flight of rickety stairs, but it had amazing views.

I wonder if Crash ever wishes he could go back in time and live there again. He has enough money now. He could probably buy the place if it ever came up for sale.

“What’s up with Crash these days?” Pam asks me after I point out his old cabin to her, not for the first time.

“Well, he’s really bummed out about Justine, of course...” I begin as we shamble along. “And I guess he’s juggling a few art projects that he’s trying to finish up for a show in September. Conceptual stuff, mostly, but there’s also a lot of drawing involved, on really big canvases.”

“I loved his last show, *The Fed and the Vampire Squid*.”

Pam and I had traveled together for the first time to see that show in New York, early in our relationship. Crash had put us up at his apartment overlooking Bryant Park and paid for most of our meals out. I’d been hoping to impress my new art-school-educated girlfriend with my brother’s New York art world connections. She’s still with me, so maybe it worked.

Pam is experiencing a memory blip: “And that big black cube he made out of a meteorite... what’s it called?” she asks.

“A Black Box For Humanity’s Redacted History.”

“Yeah, that was genius—the way he figured out how to program the computer inside it to sell itself on eBay every six weeks. And I love that he makes everyone sign a contract that pays him six percent of the price when it sells again at the next auction. Pure genius. All artists should have contracts like that.”

My brother thinks the high-end art market is run like a Ponzi scheme. He’s observed, first-hand, that when an artist reaches a certain level of fame or notoriety, his (or, much less frequently, *her*) artworks are used like poker chips to move unreal sums of money around. Crash being Crash, he came up with a conceptual art project way of getting a cut of that action, by creating the auto-auctioning meteorite cube.

“How much is the cube selling for these days?” Pam asks me.

“I’m not sure. It feels too crass to ask him—but I know it’s in the millions. You could probably look it up on eBay.”

“*Millions!*” Pam shouts above the wash of the surf. “And he gets six percent of that, every six weeks?”

“Yeah... it’s not a bad way to make a living.”

“Maybe you should hit him up for a loan.”

“I’m pretty happy with the way things are. Money just complicates things. Besides, now that my books are selling, I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“Everybody’s getting rich except me...” Pam pouts.

“Hey, up until recently you were doing a lot better than I was...” I point out. “If I hadn’t met Doc Lindstrom, I would’ve been livin’ off credit cards.”

“At least you don’t have to slap a big-ass Taco Bell logo on the front of your houses that everyone has to look at before they can go inside.”

“Oh no, not again...” I say, kicking a splash of water her way that spatters only my own rolled-up jeans. “I thought we were done talking about the evils of corporate sponsorship.”

“I’m a sellout—*and you know it.*” Pam mock-sniffs, feigning sorrow over her compromised artistic integrity.

“You’re a brand ambassador, babe. People admire you for your hustle. It’s hard enough for artists to get paid these days. You don’t have to make it harder by telling Taco Bell to fuck off with their UTube ads for Crispy Fried Chupacabras and Grande Diarritos.”

Pam laughs and lets go of the self-pitying act. “Do those come with extra guacamole?” she asks me.

“Naturally,” I say, holding out my hand, palm up, as if I’m offering her a delicious, steaming platter of diarrhea-inducing corporate Mexican food.

She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze, saying, “At least *Crash* doesn’t have to kiss up to corporate sponsors.”

“No, but he has art dealers kissing up to rich patrons on his behalf. Besides, my dear, unsociable brother has always been the exception to the rule. And he’d be the first to tell you that the career he has now was mostly due to luck.”

Arrooyrrrrffff!

“Did you just say something?” I ask Pam. But she’s already sprinting up the beach toward a flopping mound of something in the sand.

Arckf, a-wooorraakk, arckf, arrooyrrrrffff!

On closer inspection, I see that the mound is a struggling sea lion pup washed up on the shore. Pam is crouching down beside it, trying to figure out why it seems so distressed. There are no adult sea lions anywhere in sight.

“Where’s your momma?” I hear Pam asking the skinny pup as I jog up alongside them.

The sea lion pup looks up at her with its big liquid brown eyes and looses a phlegmy belch.

“He says he’s hungry,” Pam informs me. Apparently, my girlfriend can communicate with sea lions via a Vulcan-style interspecies mind-meld—a talent she’d previously kept hidden from me.

“Should we take him to a sushi bar?” I ask her. “We could order about twenty rounds of halibut sashimi.” *How does she know it’s a he?* I wonder. *Do sea lion pups have dongs?*

“I think we should call the Morro Bay Aquarium. They’ll know what to do with him.”

The Morro Bay Aquarium is a rinky-dink operation—nothing like the huge aquarium complex up in Monterey—but they have some sea lions on display and they’ll probably know who to send out to take care of this one. I look up their number on my iPhone and make the call.

I get a chatty docent named Wanda Mundo. She tells me that sea lion pups have been washing up all over the place lately, in much greater numbers than anyone’s ever seen before. No one can agree on why it’s happening, but for some reason California’s rich marine ecosystem is “turning into a desert”—mirroring conditions on land with the current drought. Krill-eating seabirds on Catalina Island are dying off in record

numbers, sick whales are beaching themselves in Northern California, sardine factories all along the coast are closing for lack of fish, and mother sea lions are having to swim farther out to sea to find food, forcing them to leave their pups behind to fend for themselves before they're ready. The pups end up malnourished and suffering from hypothermia, so they beach themselves to conserve energy and get warm.

According to Wanda, some people blame the marine ecosystem imbalance on ocean warming from man-made climate change, others think it's due to a huge toxic algae bloom off the coast of Monterey Bay, while still others point to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster that continues to dump massive amounts of radioactive crap like cesium-137 into ocean currents that carry it all the way across the Pacific from Japan to the U.S. West Coast. Whatever the underlying reason, there's no denying that California's sea creatures are taking a major hit these days.

Wanda says she'll send someone right out to pick up the sea lion pup, even though the aquarium is already taking care of three earlier rescues she's named Manny, Moe, and Jack. Each rehabilitated sea lion pup costs the aquarium about two grand, so Wanda suggests that I might want to make a tax-deductible charitable contribution sometime in the next month.

"Man, I just got a shakedown from an aquarium docent..." I tell Pam after I hang up. "But someone should be out here to get this little guy in the next half-hour or so."

"Oh good," Pam says. She sits down in the sand next to the sea lion pup. He stops bawling and noses over toward her, curious, so she picks him up and plops him in her lap. He can't weigh much more than twenty or thirty pounds. In Pam's presence, he's as docile as a constipated dachshund.

"Someone's going home smelling like sea lion piss tonight," I predict.

"Look: he's shivering," Pam says. "Let's stay with him and keep him warm until they show up." She aligns her forearms with the sea lion pup's quivering spine and starts massaging his neck. He seems to like it. I can see him relaxing. Pam has always

had a knack for inspiring trust in shy children, mistreated dogs, and other creatures known to be wary of adult-sized humans—myself included.

The sun is sinking below the horizon and the breeze is getting cooler. I sit down next to Pam, worried that the sea lion wrangler from the aquarium won't be able to find us in the dark.

"Watch for the green flash," she tells the sea lion pup as she points at the sunset.

I've never seen the fabled green flash. I suspect it's only an optical illusion created by staring at the setting sun for too long, but Pam and the sea lion pup are looking out over the ocean like they're true believers. It's kind of cute, the way the pup is raising his head for a better look and twitching his whiskers.

After the sun goes down, I feel an odd chill that sends a shiver up my spine. It's not from the cold. Something feels off. The hair on the back of my neck is prickling, like someone is staring at me, projecting a malicious intent.

I turn around and find myself staring at a huge cougar about twenty yards off, crouching at the top of a sand dune.

"Pam, put the sea lion down..." I say, keeping my eyes on the cougar.

"Why?" she asks me. Then she turns around and says, "Oh fuck."

For some reason, all I can think of is that famous painting by Henri Rousseau: the nightscape with a lion sniffing at a sleeping gypsy in the desert. *How long has that thing been stalking us?* I wonder. I also wonder if it's the same animal that killed Justine.

"Put the sea lion down. Now!" I tell Pam again. "You need to climb up on my shoulders—quick."

"I thought that only worked for bears," says Pam. We're both experienced hikers and we know that when you chance upon a bear in the wilderness (which you can't outrun or outclimb), the best thing to do is to make yourself look as big as possible and start making a lot of noise. We don't have time to

debate whether the same survival technique applies to cougars. When the cougar starts down the front of the dune toward us, big paws stealthily treading sand beneath its muscular sway, Pam sets aside her doubts—and the sea lion pup—and clamps herself on my back like she wants a piggyback ride.

I crouch down low enough to get Pam's legs situated on top of my shoulders, never taking my eyes off the cougar. It's a huge beast—probably eight or nine feet long, nose-to-tail. I'm sure it would be taller than me if it got up on its hind legs. Lucky for us, it hasn't broken into a run yet. But it's picking up its pace. Its ears have flattened and it's hunching low to the ground, like it's getting ready to pounce.

I stand up again, swaying with Pam's extra weight, and back up into the surf. My thinking is that we won't stand a chance against those claws on dry land, but if the cougar comes after us in the water I might be able to hold it under long enough to drown it.

Cougars never go in the ocean, anyway, right? At least that's what I'm hoping.

"Get away from us!" Pam shouts. "Shoo! Scram!"

I keep walking backward until I feel the higher swells pushing against the midpoint of my torso. The water is icy-cold, and my iPhone and wallet are getting soaked through my jeans, but that hardly matters. My eyes are locked on the cougar. Its eyes are locked on me.

My heart is beating so fast I can barely breathe. When the cougar gets down to the surf line, right in front of us, it hunches its shoulders and leans back on its powerful hind legs. For a split-second I think it's going to come bounding into the water after us. Then it looks to the right and Pam screams as the cougar pounces. It hits the sea lion pup in a tawny blur, grabbing him by the throat and biting down with such savagery that the pup doesn't even have time to protest. He's dead in an instant.

The cougar shakes the sea lion pup's limp body and sinks its fangs into him like he's a rubber chew toy. Pam is crying—

howling out obscenities, actually, as tears stream down her face—but I'm grateful for the distraction. The cougar chuffs and glances at us as if to say: *Did you see that? Cool, huh? That could've been you....* Then it pads away in the dying light, back up the sand dune where it came from, carrying the sea lion pup in its teeth.

Dinner has been served for the evening. It doesn't need to eat us.

I decide to stay out in the water. With Pam still on my shoulders, I start trudging through waist-deep swells back toward the parking lot, where we left the Triumph. It's slow going—like wading through soup on the Moon—but it feels safer that way, even though I'll probably be suffering from hypothermia by the time we get there.

Pam weeps the whole way, lamenting the sea lion pup's fate and cursing nature's cruelty. Me, I'm sunk deep in my own recursive thoughts. I keep coming around to the same two conclusions:

I'm pretty sure now that Justine's killer wasn't a werewolf, or Barb the Waitress. And that cougar just saved the Morro Bay Aquarium two thousand bucks.

SHOOTING THE SHIT AT ROBIN'S

“I don’t mean to sound critical, but those overalls look a little big on you, hon.”

“Better than sitting around in wet pants. Thanks, Skelly.”

“*No problemo*, dude. I always keep an extra pair in the truck, in case I get slimed by somethin’ nasty on a job site.”

“Nasty like how?”

“Well, the worst time was in a Port-a-John. Some of the guys thought it’d be funny if they set off an M-80 while I was in there takin’ a dump. Only they tossed it too close and the damn thing blew out a chunk of cinderblock proppin’ up one of the corners. The whole thing tilted, with me in it, and went rollin’ down a fuckin’ hill. I’m in there with my ears ringin’, shit and piss flyin’ everywhere, gettin’ bounced around like a tennis shoe in a clothes dryer. You can’t even imagine the stink. It was so bad I ended up pukin’ all over myself. You can bet your sweet ass I needed a change of clothes after that one.”

“*Omigod!* What’d you do to those guys?”

“At first, I wanted to fire the whole crew. But they’re all good workers, so that would’ve just been shootin’ myself in the foot. Anyway, after they busted open the crapper’s door—and found me in there lookin’ like Sasquatch in a space capsule from

Planet Shit—they all started jabberin’ at me in Spanish, sayin’ how sorry they was. I could tell by the terrified looks on their faces that the joke had gone sideways on ‘em. So I kept everyone on. I just bided my time and got even later.”

“I know this part....”

“You should. You helped set it up.”

“Oh no, Derek, what’d you do?”

“I just helped Skelly with a little engineering problem: how do you suspend 300 gallons of liquid chicken shit on top of a steep shingled roof and then have it all come down on a strategically placed picnic table during a Cinco de Mayo party?”

“Your boyfriend is a master of fluid dynamics, in case you didn’t know.”

“I guess some men never grow up.”

“We destroyed a lot of sombreros that day.”

“*Dude!* High-five!”

“At least I’m not obsessing about almost getting eaten by a mountain lion anymore. Thanks, you guys.”

“I don’t know why you were even worried. I would’ve grabbed that asshole cougar by the scruff of its neck and drowned it like a kitten if it’d come anywhere near you.”

“My hero.”

“I think you need a permit to kill a cougar in California. Maybe you could’ve just wrestled it to a draw.”

“You should’ve seen that fucker, Skelly. It was at least as big as I am—and in much better shape, I’m sure.”

“Poor Justine. She didn’t stand a chance.”

“Did you guys report it?”

“We called the Sheriff’s office. They’re looking for it.”

“Kind of creepy, innit, knowin’ a man-eatin’ cougar’s out there on the loose somewhere.”

“I thought you told me you’d been seeing a lot of those since your wife made the move to Larry Ellison’s island paradise.”

“Different species, dude. Them cougars don’t bite. They swallow men in other ways, if you get what I’m sayin’.”

“Hey, did you two forget I was here? Don’t be gross.”

“So Mexican shit-drenching stories are A-okay, but we can’t talk about Skelly’s sordid sex life?”

“No offense, Skelly, but I don’t want to know what your penis gets up to in its spare time.”

“To be honest, my junk has been feelin’ kinda bored and aimless lately. I’m thinkin’ I might sign it up for some extension courses at Cal Poly, just to give it somethin’ to do.”

“Extension courses? So the ol’ rock-and-string method isn’t working for you anymore, huh?”

“God, will you guys just stop? Can’t you be serious, even for a minute?”

“Maybe we should talk about God and intelligent design. That’d be serious.”

“Intelligent design? *Seriously?* Where do you see intelligent design on this planet? I mean, aside from sharks—the perfect killing machines.”

“Skelly thinks his ex-stepsons’ll get eaten by sharks if they don’t stop surfing.”

“They’re not ex-stepsons... they’re *my boys*.”

“I hear you, Skelly. Divorce sucks—especially for kids. And you’re right about intelligent design... I don’t see much of it. I mean, if this world has the best stuff God could come up with, I’d hate to see the designs that *didn’t* make it past the rough outline stage.”

“Yeah, like, what the fuck, God? We’ve got endless, pointless religious wars because of you. We’ve got starving children and an entire ecosystem based on the principle of *eat or be eaten*. We’ve got heart disease, colon cancer, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s,

syphilis, Ebola, and AIDS. Even making love can kill you on this planet. How fucked up is that?”

“That’s *my* fucked up, for sure. Way to go, God. You really had your thinkin’ cap on for that shit. And if population control is really such a goddam issue, why couldn’t you just make it a little harder for women to get knocked up in the first place, instead of comin’ up with all those painful ways to kill us off? Why’d you have to go and make us like sex so much—and then tell us it’s a sin if we do it for any reason aside from makin’ babies? Thanks a lot, you evil fuck.”

“I know: right? Every year at Thanksgiving, when people sit around the table mindlessly thanking God for all His blessings, I always end up thinking: *Yeah, God, thanks for letting the pilgrims commit genocide on the Native Americans so we could build our strip malls and McDonald’s franchises. Thanks for the smallpox in the blankets idea—that was genius. Thanks for letting some underpaid slaughterhouse worker hack the head off this poor turkey, so we can sit around and eat its dead flesh like a bunch of ghouls.* And we should always remember to thank God, most of all, for turning people into such co-dependent ass-kissers that they’d never even *think* to offer Him constructive criticism. Not that He’d ever reflect on it. Like some puffed-up trash TV star—the Donald Trump of the cosmos—God has way too many God-fearing people praising His worst impulses. With all those craven enablers, there’s no chance He’ll ever mend His evil ways.”

“Jesus Christ, Pam, you’re a fuckin’ pistol. No wonder Derek loves you so much.”

“I do. That’s for sure.”

“But *you* think God’s even worse than a C-minus student from Intelligent Design School. You think He’s a hostile Demiurge and all this horrendous crap is done to us *deliberately*.”

“Right... to harvest Loosh.”

“Explain your terms there, Derek. What’s a Demiurge? What’s Loosh?”

“*Demiurge* is a word the Gnostics used. It dates back to around the time the Bible was being written. The Gnostics thought the Christian god, Jehovah, was a fucking maniac. You can see it for yourself, with an impartial reading of the Old Testament. Jehovah is jealous, pissed off all the time. He stomps around with His plagues and tempests, slaughtering innocents whenever he damn well feels like it. There’s that mass murder of the first-borns he pulled off with Moses, and all that crap he dumped on Job... I mean, the guy’s a cosmic sadist, making schoolboy bets with Satan: *‘Let’s see how these humans hold up when we stress ‘em out to the max with trials and tribulations. C’mon, it’ll be fun!’* So the Gnostics came up with a name for that demented pseudogod. They called him the Demiurge. The *Half-Maker*. Because a full-blown God—an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God—wouldn’t have made this world in such a half-assed way.”

“For example, a loving God wouldn’t have created a world so full of evil and suffering.”

“That’s the big one. The Christians explain that away with the concept of Original Sin, blaming man for all the evil and suffering in the world. But the Gnostics call bullshit on that. If God created man *in His image*, then He can’t blow off His responsibility for man’s fate. Only a flawed creator would create a flawed universe. I’ve gone into this in a lot more detail in my books.”

“I’ve been meaning to read those. But I keep gettin’ distracted by work and divorce bullshit and... *cougars*. Lots of hot, neurotic, time-wastin’ cougars.”

“That’s not my particular area of expertise, but I can understand how you might find cougars distracting.”

“You were pretty distracted by one tonight.”

“Different kind of cougar, as we’ve established.”

“True—but still a good tool for a demented Dummy-urge, or whatever you call it. So tell me about Loosh.”

“*Loosh* is a term that originated with Robert Monroe. He was one of the world’s leading authorities on astral projection.”

"I've noticed a lot of black girls are real good at that—Nicki Minaj, in particular. *Wait...* does that sound racist?"

"It's a little racist. White girls and hot Asian girls can project their asses too, y'know... although there's a more scientific-sounding term for that. I just can't remember it right now."

"*Callipygian* might be the word you're searching for there, but that's a whole 'nother topic: the immortal form of the female backside. We were talking about *out-of-body* experiences."

"Like when you die on the operatin' table and you see a tunnel of white light and all them old people on the Other Side who used to bust your balls when you were a kid?"

"Kind of like that, yeah. This all ties in with Gnosticism. The Gnostics were shamans and seers. They claimed to get their information from direct, out-of-body communion with the Aeon Sophia—who represents Wisdom with a capital W—as opposed to that false pretender god she accidentally created, the Demiurge. But before you go writing off the Gnostics as just another bunch of self-deluded believers in some crackpot religion, you should consider this: Gnosticism was the most widely suppressed belief system in human history. And usually, when authoritarian regimes try to suppress information, it's not because that information doesn't contain any truth; it's because the truth it conveys is important to your survival and dangerous to those in power."

"Sounds about right."

"The Gnostics knew Christianity was an ideological virus for perpetuating the master-slave relationship. All that Jesus stuff about turning the other cheek, loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you—promising you'll be rewarded in heaven after being persecuted and exploited here on Earth—all that seems like a really good deal for the guys in charge, right? The same guys who put their seal of approval on Christianity and then waged a brutal campaign to exterminate Gnosticism and make it seem like it never existed."

"The ruling patriarchy strikes again—those bastards."

“Fuckin’ hell. So this Monroe dude you’re talkin’ about... he was a Gnostic, too?”

“No, not exactly. He was a radio producer and the founder of a multi-million-dollar cable TV company in Virginia. He used his own money to finance a non-profit research lab called the Monroe Institute that scientifically investigated out-of-body experiences and astral traveling. My brother, Crash, told me about him. He met Monroe in person while he was lecturing at Esalen.”

“Who was lecturing? Monroe, or your brother?”

“Both—but I was talking about Robert Monroe. He was on a lecture tour because he’d written some books about his out-of-body experiences. In one of those books, *Far Journeys*, he used the term *Loosh* to describe a sort of spiritual and emotional energy—or *psychevoltage*—that we all generate in varying amounts. It’s similar to what we think of as *life force*, or the Chinese concept of *qi*, but with a twist: Loosh also serves as food for other interdimensional entities.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah. I know it’s a weird fucking concept. Monroe said that while he was out-of-body—*astral traveling*—some ultra-wise ‘light beings’ would occasionally pass him ‘thought-balls’ that conveyed instantaneous information in the form of imagery, experience, history, and intuited language. According to one of those thought-balls, Loosh is being farmed on Earth by Someone (like the Demiurge) because, for other entities, Loosh is the equivalent of a crazily addictive drug, or an exotic but necessary fuel. And there’s never enough of it to go around.”

“How do you know the guy wasn’t just makin’ that shit up?”

“Because it rings true for me on a deep, intuitive level. And the Gnostics believed something similar almost two thousand years ago. The idea has a long history.”

“It explains a lot, once you understand how it works.”

“So how’s it work?”

“When we die, our Loosh is released and harvested by interdimensional beings that use it to extend their own lifespans. We’re their food source. They seem to think they own us, like cattle—and not just us, but all Loosh-producing life on this planet. That’s why Nature is ‘red in tooth and claw’—why every creature has to kill to survive, either by eating living plants or other living animals. That killing releases the victim’s life force—the *Loosh*—so it can be harvested.”

“That makes life on Earth sound like a school for murder.”

“This isn’t anything new. Some of the oldest scriptures in the world say we were created as food for the gods. The Garbha Upanishad—written in Sanskrit around six centuries before Christ—said the body is created for sacrifice, and all those who live in this world are sacrificers. But the Gnostics were the best at describing how the whole process works. They had a name for the Loosh Harvesters. They called them Archons.”

“*Our Cons?*”

“Close. It’s spelled A-R-C-H-O-N-S. Archons. The ancient Greeks used that same word. For them it meant *petty rulers* or *Authorities*, but for the Gnostics it had a much more specific meaning. The Archons are minions of the Demiurge—whose secret name is Yaldabaoth. They’re intrapsychic mind parasites. According to Gnostic creation myths, the Archons arose prematurely, before the formation of the Earth, when Yaldabaoth split-off from the Aeon Sophia and jacked-off into the cosmos.”

“No shit! So the Archons grew up from the sperm of some spent space monster?”

“Supposedly. That’s probably why our moms used to tell us we’d go blind if we masturbated too much: Yaldabaoth is also known as Samael, the Blind God. Anyway, the Archons from Yaldabaoth’s cosmic punkwad are supposedly nonhuman and inorganic. And they’re intrapsychic—meaning they can get inside our minds—but when they assume physical form they look like aborted fetuses, or like those little grey aliens that Whitley Strieber wrote about. Their proper domain is the *Hebdomad*—the

other seven visible planets in our solar system, aside from the Earth—but they come here, anyway, to fuck with us.”

“The Hebdomad, huh? They didn’t have anything to do with that Charlie Hebdo massacre, did they?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they did. A false flag operation like the Charlie Hebdo massacre would fit right in with the way they do business. The Gnostics say the Archons are inferior to humans because they lack *ennoia*—or creative will—and *epinoia*—or creative imagination. Which means they can only imitate, never create. But they’re really good at fooling us. The classic Sethian Gnostic text, the *Apocryphon of John*, tells us that the Archons delight in deception. Their preferred method is called *antimimōn*—or counter mimicry. In other words, they can’t create anything new, but they can copy things that already exist and then invert their original meaning or purpose. It’s like Orwellian *doublethink* mixed up with reality TV. They take something organic and real and turn it into something manufactured and fake—kind of like those genetically modified seeds from Monsanto that sprout once and then go sterile, so you have to buy them again every year. Or the USA PATRIOT Act, which eroded the very liberties that the original U.S. patriots fought for during the founding of this country. Voltaire could’ve been warning us about the Archons when he wrote: *‘Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.’*”

“So the Archons are Republicans? Or *neocons*?”

“Good one. They’re deceivers—a predatory mimic species that feeds off emotional fields with a very low vibration. In other words, they eat fear and suffering. That’s something else I forgot to mention: Robert Monroe was told that Loosh is harvested not only at the moment of death; it can also be harvested during moments of extreme fear, anger, or sadness. The more we suffer, the bigger our Loosh payload. So the Archons excel at creating scenarios that stir up our negative emotions and cause suffering. Genocide, ecocide, terrorism, false flag events, child abuse, rape, spiritual domination, financial entrapment... all those things, and more, are used to ramp up Loosh production.”

“That’s sick.”

“That’s life on this planet. Just turn on CNN or Fox News on any given night and you’ll see the Archons’ plans in action.”

“And you’re sayin’ all that shit happens because of this Yaldabaoth sonofabitch?”

“Not exactly. It’s more like Yaldabaoth and his Archons intentionally distort things, making our lives on Earth much worse than they’d be otherwise, if people were left to their own error-prone but basically decent ways.”

“I’m not so sure all people are basically decent.”

“Most are, for sure. I mean, look at you. Look at Pam.”

“I’m not *always* decent. Especially in the bedroom.”

“Cheers to that!”

“Healthy, playful sex between consenting adults is one of the great pleasures of living in the natural world. But the Archons use it as a control mechanism by making lust a sin—or worse, a crime.”

“You can thank Christians again there—for demonizing sex.”

“Not just them. Most major religions promote an agenda of patriarchal domination that’s anti-women and anti-sex. Think of the Muslims, or the Hasidim. It’s a worldwide emotional plague. Wilhelm Reich called it the ‘mechanistic-mystical complex.’ It shows up whenever an authoritarian regime tries to repress the sexual feelings that paganism and some of the Gnostics once held sacred. That repression leads to guilt and shame and rejection of the self. It turns people into unfeeling zombies that can be easily manipulated by crypto-fascist propaganda. Which is just how the global elitists and Yaldabaoth’s Archons like it.”

“So let’s fuck our way to freedom! *Oops*... sorry. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“Have you guys decided? I can come back if you need more time.”

“Yeah, we might need a few more minutes. I haven’t even looked at a menu yet.”

“If you believe Robert Monroe, we’re the main course.”

A GIANT SQUID IN THE SEINE

Lately, I've been thinking about bridge construction: the metaphorical bridges we all build, day after plodding day, to span the gap between setting ourselves some difficult task and actually getting it done.

Sometimes you start out with a flawed premise and you never get there. You end up building a bridge to nowhere. I did that a lot when I was younger. For instance, I thought I could become fluent in French just by listening to Serge Gainsbourg albums and watching movies directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Didn't work. I now have almost the entire Gainsbourg catalog committed to memory and I've seen every film in Godard's oeuvre, but if I happened to be visiting Paris and a French policeman tried to warn me that a giant squid in the Seine was snatching American tourists off the Pont des Arts and eating them alive, I'd be fucked.

Gainsbourg and Godard never mentioned giant squids.

For the past several weeks Pam and I have been bridge-building as a team, working together on a new video for her UTube channel. The project is stretching way beyond the fifteen-minute format of her usual shows. "Galactic Loosh Farming and the Archons: An Exploration of Antimimon" is what she's calling it. Its starting point was the conversation we had with Skelly at Robin's restaurant on the night we saw the

cougar, but now it's become much more than that. It's an indictment, in words and images, of how Archontic thinking is destroying California, America, and the world at large.

"You don't have to believe in Archons or Loosh for the following presentation to make sense," Pam says during her introduction to the video, twirling around on her stripper pole. "In fact, it might help you to think of those two words as analogous to sociopathic global elitists and the health, wealth, and happiness they think it's their right to steal from everyone else. But that alone doesn't do the words justice. If you'll try to suspend your judgment for the remainder of this video, I think you might find that Archons and Loosh lend a certain poetic depth to your understanding of the crypto-fascist machinations that have sent our sweet green world on an unholy trajectory toward hell on Earth."

As Pam fades to black, a quotation appears on the screen in white Helvetica Neue:

If you hate violence and don't believe in politics, the only major remedy remaining is education.

—George Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda*

We fade in on three sea lion pups stranded on a beach. (Wanda Mundo let us borrow Manny, Moe, and Jack from the Morro Bay Aquarium for the shoot in exchange for a rather substantial charitable contribution from my recent book sales.) Pam explains, in voice-over, what's happening to California's marine ecosystem—how it mirrors the severe drought impacting

the entire state. She also talks about the exploitation of orcas at SeaWorld—over clips from the movie *Blackfish*—explaining how the imprisonment of those majestic and intelligent sea mammals, in what amounts to a large bathtub, tends to turn them into dangerous aquatic basketcases. Pam goes on to talk about corporate exploitation in general, noting that the Swiss firm Nestlé continues to drain around 705 million gallons of water a year from California’s aquifers (paying only 65 cents for every 470 gallons), which it then bottles and resells at a mammoth markup while the state suffers through the hottest and driest four-years in its history. (She also mentions that Nestlé has been using child slave labor to harvest the cacao it gets from African farms on the Ivory Coast.) We then cut to an interview Pam did with Jay Famiglietti—the senior water scientist at JPL and a professor of Earth system science at UC Irvine—who explains that California only has a year of water supply left in its reservoirs.

“Why do we so consistently put corporate welfare ahead of the basic rights of living human beings?” Pam turns and asks the camera. “Why do we continue to subsidize Big Ag companies growing water-thirsty crops like almonds and alfalfa in California while the state imposes water restrictions on its own citizens? Why should American taxpayers pick up the tab every time the ‘too-big-to-fail’ banks make bets they can’t pay with other people’s money? And why doesn’t anyone ever go to jail when those same banks get caught gaming the world’s biggest financial markets by colluding to manipulate Libor rates and rig major foreign currency exchange trades? Banks like JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup have been convicted of federal crimes—forced to admit in court that they ripped-off the rest of the world in a huge way. But our ‘Justice Department’—an Orwellian joke at this point—lets them off the hook if they agree to pay a fine that amounts to a tiny fraction of what they stole in the first place.”

At this point, back at her stripper pole, Pam starts taking off her clothes. She knows that ninety percent of her viewers will tune this stuff out otherwise.

“Why does it seem like ‘bad dreams are good in the great plan’—to quote Joni Mitchell; is it because Gordon Gecko got it

right? If ‘Greed is good’ does that mean absolute greed is absolutely great? Don’t make me laugh. Greed destroys lives. Honest, hard-working small business owners and families are plunged into poverty every day because of corporate greed. But these guys high up in the corporatocracy—the sick, sociopathic one-percent—they don’t believe in karma. They just float around on their clouds of entitlement, thinking they can take whatever they want—*hurt* whoever they want—with no consequences whatsoever. That, in a nutshell, is what’s causing the ruination of this planet: the relatively small number of thieving shitbirds that have acquired way too much money and power and political influence by nefarious means.” With a belly dancer’s shimmy, Pam starts to wriggle out of her pale blue shantung silk dress.

“You know who I’m talking about: the mega-rich exploiters who think they deserve so much more than the rest of us. But material success is never enough for them. To be truly happy, they also need to see everyone around them fail. The greatest happiness of the greatest number isn’t a concept that interests them. In fact, they’re actively opposed to it. They’d rather reign in hell than contribute toward a shared heaven on Earth. They’d gladly cover the whole planet in toxic slime if it meant selling more Brawny paper towels. The Koch brothers, the Bush family, the self-dealing loyalists to Goldman Sachs in the top spots at the U.S. Treasury and the Federal Reserve... they all get off on gang-raping the American Dream. And we’ve been letting those grinning old ghouls hump away at us—we’ve been bending over and spreading our collective ass cheeks with barely a complaint—because it seems impossible to stop them with anything short of a populist revolution.”

By now, Pam is down to just a few strategically placed scarves and a royal blue thong. That’s more than she usually takes off for her shows. She really wants to hammer home these next few points:

“A functioning democratic government should recognize the legitimate will of the people, guarantee human rights, fight corruption, regulate corporations, resist the influence of oligarchs, and protect the environment. But our government is doing the exact opposite of that these days. The same goes for

our compromised judicial system. The Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision endowed the so-called 'personhood' of corporations with the 'right' to express their political opinions by spending unlimited corporate cash to buy elections. That ruling has turned out to be the single most destructive thing that could have been done to American democracy. Corporations aren't people—they're immortal soulless entities that feed off people. Throughout history, U.S. corporations have exhibited a chilling amorality: exploiting slaves, children, and cheap foreign labor for the sake of profits; poisoning the environment; war-profiteering with their fascist buddies and the Nazis... you name it, they've done it... every evil thing you can think of. What the hell was the Supreme Court thinking? It's like everyone at the top has caught a virus that makes them do the wrong thing. And maybe that's just what it is: an ideological flu bug, a psychic contagion, a mind parasite. It's *Archontic possession*. And if you give me a few minutes, I'll explain what that means."

Pam fades to black again. This time, a series of title cards alternates with a montage of images. Marcus Fjellström's "The Eroding" accompanies them on the soundtrack. We've spent weeks finessing this section—grabbing stock images and Internet video clips where we can, obsessing over the editing rhythms. Fjellström's composition begins with a crystalline ringing that seems to be coming from the heart of a dark enchanted forest, like an eerie fairytale set to music. The first title card reads:

As Robert Monroe describes it, Loosh is a form of spiritual and emotional energy; *psychevoltage* might be a better term for it...

A rapid-fire montage cycles through snapshots of people in the grip of strong emotions: laughing, loving, lusty, loathing, lashing out in hurt and anger. The barrage of human drama plays out for just under a minute.

Loosh is nearly synonymous with *life force*, or the Sanskrit word *prana*, or the Latin *vis vitae*, or Wilhelm Reich's *orgone*, or the Chinese concept of *qi*...

The montage slows down enough to allow individual images to register. Red-robed Chinese monks sit in meditation outside a Buddhist temple. Long-legged prostitutes in micro-minis troll for johns in front of the Honolulu Hilton. Fierce Latina girls in stars-and-stripes bikinis flip off Irish policemen during the June 2000 Puerto Rican Day riots in New York City. A cherubic child grasps the bright green fuse of a blossoming sunflower.

But there's a twist: Loosh also serves as food for interdimensional entities. In the literature of Gnosticism, those entities are known as Archons...

Sinuous tentacles climb up the skirt of a Japanese anime girl—a prelude to rape by a lascivious giant squid. Nightmare-fueled visions of Lovecraftian monsters flash by, blending with official government portraits of Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Nixon, and Pol Pot.

The Gnostics believe the material world is a prison farm. The Archons are our wardens. They farm our Loosh and control the minds of our leaders via *Archontic possession*...

A jailed animatronic buccaneer from Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride beckons to a scruffy dog holding the warden's keys on a steel ring dangling from its teeth. Brainwashing scenes from *The Manchurian Candidate*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Stalin Says* follow as the soundtrack segues into Gang of Four's "To Hell With Poverty 2005" with its bouncy refrain: "*Some are insane / and they're in charge....*"

The Archon-possessed puppet leaders (presidents, queens, dictators, CEOs) act as superior slaves directing lesser slaves to fulfill the Archons' Loosh-eating agenda...

We see Silvio Berlusconi cavorting with a pair of starry-eyed sluts on Italian television, a bare-chested Vladimir Putin waving a gold-plated AK-47 from atop a white steed, and George W. Bush saying with squinty-eyed bravado: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists...” during his address to Congress that kicked off the War On Terror on September 20th, 2001.

Loosh is harvested at the moment of death, or when negative emotions run high. The Archons have developed a vast array of tools and techniques to maximize their harvest...

A mother lion takes down a zebra foal in the most savage way imaginable. A great white shark erupts from a rolling wave to snatch a surfer in its jaws. A crocodile eats a shrieking Florida toddler in OshKosh overalls while his stoned trailer trash mom watches from a lawn chair. Naked Iraqi prisoners are tortured and humiliated at Abu Ghraib.

The most common Loosh harvesting ploys are known to us as fear, greed, envy, anger, self-pity, guilt, shame, pain, family, sickness, sacrifice, murder, and divorce...

The screen fills with graphic scenes of Mafia violence, videotaped beheadings by ISIS, and very public reminders not to fuck with Mexican drug cartels. Police in full riot gear attack anti-globalists protesting the 1999 WTO Conference in Seattle. Casey Anthony, Scott Peterson, Timothy McVeigh, and O.J. Simpson glower at their murder trials.

For mass harvesting, there's war, famine, earthquakes, wildfires, floods, hurricanes, terrorism, epidemics, WMDs, capitalism, socialism, religion, and central banking...

Stock footage of all of the above flickers across the screen, ending with former Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan—in glossy black latex top hat and tails—driving a bloody, gore-spattered wheat combine harvester across amber waves of grain.

Today Galactic Loosh Farming is at an all-time high, thanks to the unflagging efforts and ingenuity of our sponsors—the Archons.

That's all we have so far. The next phase of the video will examine the Archontic use of antimimon (providing a look at how the War on Terror has only increased the amount of terror in the world, and how the War on Drugs has made the drug trade more lucrative, *ad nauseam*...). Pam and I have been gathering a lot of material toward that end, but it's just an inchoate lump of digitized junk at this point. We still need to come up with a coherent narrative to make sense of it.

But how do you make sense of something that, at its heartless heart, makes no sense at all?—unless you understand that its ultimate goal is to increase human suffering.



Well, all of the angels, they'd sell off your soul / For a pair of new wings and anything gold....

We're sitting in the middle of Pam's computer-crowded living room listening to Isaac Brock, of Modest Mouse, singing "Bankrupt On Selling" from the *Baron Von Bullshit Rides Again* EP. I've suggested it would be the perfect soundtrack for the antimimon section, but Pam disagrees. She thinks we need an instrumental because there's a lot of dialogue in our selected video clips that will need to be heard. She suggests "The Disjointed" by her man Marcus Fjellström—or maybe something by A Winged Victory For The Sullen.

"Y'know, Derek, I'm grateful for all your help..." Pam says, not unkindly, "but I think I've got this now. Maybe it's time for you to get back to writing your book."

Video is without question Pam's area of expertise, and I know I'm just an amateur in that realm, but I'm still a little hurt by her dismissal. "My book..." I mutter. "No one wants to read books anymore. Reading is too hard, compared to watching a video."

"Yeah, I know... it's a flatscreen world out there now, Bucko. It's all about pixel-thin shallowness and instant gratification. At

the rate we're dumbing down the culture, pretty soon we'll all be reduced to watching 'Cats Puking to Techno' clips on UTube."

"Exactly," I say, feeling a rant coming on. "We're being lured into gibbering idiocy by a vast computer-networked hive mind with no real concern for human life—and zero sense of humor. Oogle, Facebook, LinkedIn, Glamazon, and all the other klepto-corporate Web barons have made their fortunes by invading our privacy. They know when we're in love and when we're feeling lonely. They know what we like to eat and drink—and what kind of porn we watch. With their data mining and affinity marketing algorithms, they can predict our behavior and influence our subconscious thoughts to entrain us into doing what they want. Lose your privacy, and the next thing to go is your free will. It's like that cosmic squidmonster, Cthulhu, speaking to us in our dreams. And you know how that ends: with everyone going psychopathically insane, or dying in really grotesque and horrific ways. No wonder nobody reads anymore. It's not so scary if you stay on the surface. You won't notice what's going on in the dark murky depths, where the big fish with really sharp teeth like to swim."

"But smart people still read when they want the kind of depth that only a good book can give them," Pam counters.

"It's happening less and less..." I say, knowing the statistics will back me up on that. "The vast majority of people barely read six books a year. Twenty-three percent read no books at all. Real readers—the people who love reading the way other people love watching television—they're a vanishing species, not all that different from eccentric hobbyists that specialize in some arcane pastime, like collecting Fauve paintings or shooting infrared film at Angkor Wat."

I'm not sure where the original notion came from, but during my student years I saw writers as glamorous intellectual heroes who toiled in a rigorous and even dangerous profession. I idolized Camus, Hesse, Huxley, Bellow, Roth, Orwell, and Mailer in the same way that other kids idolized Batman, James Bond, and Captain Kirk.

For me, literature has always been as important as sex—and in my mind, the boundaries between them often blurred. As a horny pubescent bookworm, I knew that whenever the author of *Lolita*, Big Vlad Nabokov, was dismissed by people as a snooty perv, those same illiterate heathens were missing out on the intense linguistic self-pleasuring to be found in *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*. In college, every sexually experimenting sorority girl that I banged was my homage to Henry Miller. I'd gleaned the somewhat mistaken idea from *Tropic of Cancer* that I should give in to lust whenever possible. My roommates, Thad and Stoney, used to call me the De-Virginizer; every Friday night, when I had a date, they'd send me out the door on a gust of bong-befogged bonhomie, both of them blessing me—in the headbanger choral style of the *Wayne's World* theme song—with the inverted malediction: “*Let him get fucked!*”

Even after college, books were what counted most with me. Reading is what kept me going. When I was deep in the Slough of Divorce as an entry-level adult, it was Charles Bukowski who threw me a lifeline, reminding me that when you're handed a crapsack world—full of loud bitchery, signifying legal hassles—there's always booze to be drunk, fights to be fought, and long shots that sometimes pay off. And perhaps most important of all, it was John Steinbeck's rhapsodies about compassionate hookers and valorous *paisanos* in his comic novels set on California's Central Coast—*Tortilla Flat*, *Sweet Thursday*, and *Cannery Row*—that convinced me that moving to Morro Bay and dating a stripper could be a very fine way to live.

I'm convinced now that literature has made my life much richer than it would have been otherwise. How does that famous quote from George R.R. Martin go? “A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies, but the dorkwad who wastes all his time on Facebook gets less than one.”

Maybe that's not exactly it, but it's close.

“You might not think that people are reading much these days,” Pam says to me, “but they're sure reading *your* books. Or

haven't you noticed? Two of your books are still in Glamazon's Top 500."

"That only means I'm selling a few hundred books a day," I tell her. "Which is *great*... don't get me wrong... but your video might be seen by half-a-million people in just the first week."

"Get over it," she says. "You can't compare the two things. People have to make an effort with a book. They can't just kick back and let it wash over them, like with a video. And books usually cost money, while my stuff is free. You're just being ornery today."

I'll admit, my new status as a best-selling author has brought out a streak of perversity in me. I've all but stopped writing. I just type in the occasional book-related note to myself on my iPhone. I've also pretty much stopped checking my rankings on Glamazon. After my books hit the Top 100, I knew it'd all be downhill from there—and I didn't want to watch them tumble.

Plus, there's a bunch of new book reviews for me to read, which always makes me crazy.

As a general rule, I find about fifty percent of my reviews flattering. Some readers really seem to relate to what I'm doing. They're my champions. I know it takes imaginative sympathy and some serious thought to write a positive review—and I appreciate their efforts. I think of those reviewers as members of my spiritual tribe—or my *karass*, if anyone is still familiar with that old Kurt Vonnegut term. I wish I could buy every one of them an all-expenses-paid trip to Brussels so we could sit down together and hoist coachman's glasses to our health in a Belgian beer hall.

Another thirty percent of the reviews are essentially neutral. Those reviewers claim they loved certain parts of my books and found other parts a slog. Sometimes they'll get even more specific, complaining that there was too much expository dialogue on a particular page, or that some of the conspiracy theories (but not all of them) were too over-the-top.

Okay, fair enough.

But it's the last twenty percent—the *haters*—that really sets me off. I'm not a culturally designated Overlord of Kitsch like Jeff Koons, who was overheard by the art critic Jerry Saltz saying, "You don't get it, man. I'm a fucking genius." I don't have anywhere near that much self-esteem. So it seriously messes with my confidence as a writer when someone starts off a hostile review of one of my books with: "OMG this book took forever to read. And I forced myself to finish it. Wasted time...."

Of course, I've seen similar reviews for *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick* ("Call me Ishmael? Please. Call me Annoyingly Pompous is more like it....") Still, it hurts. And I don't mean to be comparing myself with Pynchon or Melville here—that's not the point. In fact, I can say with absolute certainty that I'm not even in the same league with wily old Tom Pynchon, because every time I finish writing another novel I send a query letter about it to the attention of his wife, Melanie Jackson, who happens to be a high-powered New York literary agent.

I've never heard back from her.

Which reminds me—there's something I've been sitting on, and I think it might be time to share it with Pam:

"I'm sorry if I've been a prick lately," I say, meaning it, "but something's been bothering me... and it might be affecting my mood. A couple of weeks ago I got this really weird email from a New York literary agency. I didn't tell you about it because I thought I was being punked."

"So what'd it say?" Pam asks as she fiddles with a video timeline, only half-paying attention.

"It said the agency wants to represent me and they're pretty sure they can place my next book with Farrar, Straus and Giroux."

"No way!"

"That's what I thought: *No way*. So I just ignored it for a while. But then I talked to Crash about it and he said he knew someone who was represented by that same agency... Patricia Bosworth, I think her name was... she wrote that biography

about Diane Arbus that was turned into a movie with Nichole Kidman. So, anyway, Patricia called up her people there and found out the offer was legit. Crash told me about it last night. He thinks we should head out to New York and stay with him awhile, so I can meet these guys and see if I trust them enough to do a deal.”

“Are you kidding? That sounds great!”

“I’m not so sure. It might mean losing control of my books.”

Some reviewers—like the *OMG-this-book-took-forever* lady—have taken it upon themselves to offer me editorial suggestions. Where these self-styled amateur editors get their nerve I have no idea. Their suggestions always strike me as insipid and not at all well thought out. Maybe I’m being overly sensitive, but I swear, if I edited my books according to their directives (pruning back my thorniest characters, losing the focus on real-world conspiracies, banishing all metafictional/metaphysical asides, etc.), I’d end up writing dumbed-down Robert Ludlum thrillers. And there are plenty of dumbed-down Robert Ludlum thrillers in the world already. Why should I add to the pile?

If I sign on with a literary agency, I’m afraid I’ll be forced into writing exactly that kind of a book, for the sake of profits—and if that’s how it’s going to play out, then I’d rather not have a literary agent at all.

I try to explain all that to Pam as we sit there in her webbed Aeron chairs with Trout resting on the floor between us, but she tells me a good entertainment lawyer can make sure that doesn’t happen. My fears are overblown, she says.

“Plus, a good literary agent can help get your books into libraries,” she points out, “so you won’t be at the mercy of Glamazon’s sneaky algorithms. That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Without bothering to wait for my answer, she goes online and starts checking for the cheapest available flights out of San Luis Obispo to New York.

“What about Trout?” I ask her. At the mention of his name, Trout’s fuzzy ears prick up. When I lean over to pet him, he gets

on his feet and strikes a yoga pose (downward dog, of course...). Then he yawns so hard that it comes out sounding like a squeaky hinge.

"Trout can come with us," Pam says. "He doesn't mind flying if I load him up with doggy Dramamine first. Does Crash like dogs?"

"Crash *loves* dogs. He's been talking about getting a puppy. A Goldendoodle. I guess he found some Amish farmers out in Pennsylvania whose dog just had a new litter."

"Well then, if he wants to be a dog owner, maybe Trout can show him the ropes."

"I'll call him tonight and make sure everything's cool. When do you want to leave?"

"As soon as possible," Pam says, saving the Final Cut Pro project on her Mac screen. "I think we both could use a break from Archons and antimimon about now."

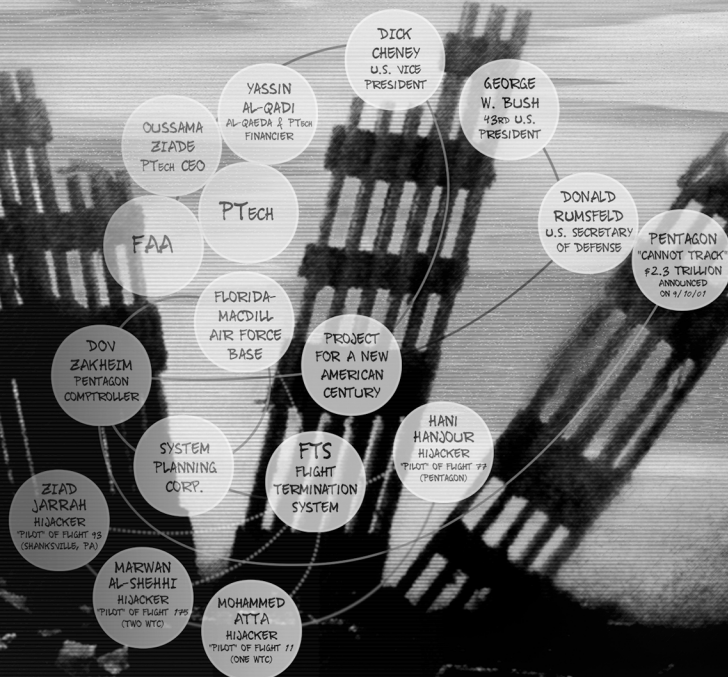
"You're right about that..." I say.

Stand in the center of a bridge too long, staring down into an abyss, and you'll begin to entertain irrational thoughts about the abyss staring up your girlfriend's skirt. But at the same time, I'm worried that I haven't seen everything I need to see in regard to this literary agent business. I have an uneasy feeling that I'm missing some crucial piece of information:

"Ne sortez pas sur le Pont des Arts. Un calmar géant est de manger les touristes américains."

"I'm sorry... I didn't get that. I'm American. *Parlez-vous anglais?*"

"Non. Adieu connard."



NEW YORK

**Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information.
Huxley feared those who would give us so much we would
be reduced to passivity and egoism.**

—Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

CRASH VS. THE SLAVEMASTERS OF NEW YORK

The taxi from the airport drops us off, with Trout and our luggage, in front of the New York Public Library. It's a thrill to be in the city with Pam on such a lovely spring afternoon. We hike hand in hand up the stairs between the two marble lions: Patience and Fortitude. People sit in the sunlight on the marble steps, staring at mobile phones, sipping iced coffee. Hundreds of fat red tulips bloom in the freshly mulched flowerbeds. I take a few pictures of Pam on my iPhone, posing her in front of one of the lions (Fortitude, I think...). Then we head up and to the left, past the green café tables scattered along the terrace, marveling at the library's Beaux-Arts beauty. There's definitely nothing like it to be found in Morro Bay.

My brother lives just around the corner in an elegant twelve-story co-op called Bryant Park Place. It was one of Midtown Manhattan's first skyscrapers, built with Andrew Carnegie's money back in 1907 as a posh Renaissance Revival style clubhouse for American engineers and industrialists. They called it The Engineers Club back then. Its members included Carnegie, Herbert Hoover, Thomas Edison, Charles Lindbergh, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Henry Clay Frick, and Nikola Tesla.

Pam insists on reading the bronze plaque to the left of the lobby entrance before we go inside, while I stand looking at the cheery French-style carousel across the street in Bryant Park. A

tall doorman in a navy blue uniform comes down the steps. He looks like he could be President Obama's graying cousin. With a friendly smile, he asks us if we're familiar with the plaque's commemorated names.

"I was just wondering if Nikola Tesla ever lived here..." Pam says. "I'm sort of a fan."

"Tesla just visited, but he was given an award here once," says the knowledgeable doorman. "The only one who lived here was Carnegie—although I think Edison sometimes stayed overnight, when he didn't want to commute back to New Jersey. Some of those men were very mean, I've been told."

"So I've heard..." I say.

"Frick used to hire gangsters to beat up people when they wanted to start unions."

"I've heard that, too."

"A lot of those really rich guys got that way by acting like criminals," Pam adds with a pert Thai scowl of disapproval; "making other people work for nothing so they could have too much of everything."

"Yes, but they gave a lot of money back to charity," says the doorman, almost as if he feels a need to apologize for them.

"Well, what else could they do with it, once they were old and about to die?"

"Right. You can't buy your way out of the tomb, can you?" The doorman smiles and invites us into the lobby after I tell him we're there to see my brother. "Sure—Gordon—I know him," he says, holding the door open for us at the top of the steps. "You look just like him. He lives on the eleventh floor in what used to be the ballroom, before they cut it up into apartments."

The doorman puts in a call to Crash from the front desk to make sure that he expects visitors and then we're given the nod to go ahead. We pass beneath a glittering crystal chandelier in the ornate lobby, its light dancing all around us, making everything sparkle. Fluted Corinthian pilasters of beautiful old

mahogany appear along the marble walls at regular intervals. They serve no structural purpose that I can see, but they sure do look pretty in a Roman temple sort of way. Those old architects really knew how to glam things up when they had a robber baron's ill-gotten cash to spend.

Trout and I head straight for the sweeping marble staircase toward the back, but Pam wants us to wait for the elevator. When the elevator's polished brass door finally slides open, Crash is there behind it, wearing his usual outfit of jeans and a crisp black linen shirt with the cuffs rolled up.

"Hey!" he says, embracing me in a big, awkward bear hug. We're brothers, but physical demonstrations of affection weren't part of our family life while I was growing up. I don't know if it was because our dad died in the plane crash, or because our mom was a pain-killer-addicted nudist with borderline personality hang-ups, or what—hugs just never happened. Even a handshake would have felt overbearing and weird to my former boyhood self.

"Derek! How've you been?" Crash asks as he lets me go.

Before I can answer, Trout gets up on his hind legs with a frisky bark and makes a wild-assed kangaroo leap into Crash's arms. Without even hesitating, Crash catches him and cradles the big mutt like a puppy, even though Trout must weigh close to sixty pounds. Trout responds by enthusiastically licking Crash's neck and chin, as if they're old friends.

"Jeez, Trout, you just met the guy..." Pam complains.

"It's probably because I look like Derek," Crash says as Trout gets in a good lick right across his nostrils. He raises his nose beyond Trout's slobbery pink reach. "Hi, Pam. Great to see you again! I take it this is Trout?"

"In the furry flesh. He's usually not so forward."

"He's acting like a dog bimbo, if you ask me," I say.

I always feel some competitive jealousy whenever I'm around my older brother. Of the two of us, he's taller and leaner; he's also probably smarter and better looking (although not by much '*abem*'...). And now he's a rich and semi-famous New York artist

who owns a multi-million-dollar apartment in one of Andrew Carnegie's old buildings.

Why shouldn't I be jealous?

Anyway, I think envy gets a bad rap. It's only a sin if you buy into the slave religions. Otherwise, it's just the natural human impulse, when confronted with someone else's absurd good fortune, to ask yourself:

Why is that fucking clown getting all the breaks?

But at the same time, I truly love my big bro—and what he's accomplished makes me feel proud to be related to him. He's come a long way for someone who was born on the high-functioning side of the autism spectrum—someone who used to be a narcoleptic and a chronic stutterer.

And not everything in Crash's life has always gone his way. When he was still in his teens, he was nearly killed when a car he was in got rammed from behind and pushed over a cliff in Big Sur. He spent about five years walking around with a case of psychogenic amnesia because of that accident. Somehow, he ended up spending most of that time in a resident scholar program at the Esalen Institute. My mom and I had no clue what had happened to him during those years he went missing—we assumed he'd been killed.

There's also the sad fact that Crash has never had anyone in his life like Pam (Justine doesn't count, for obvious reasons...), so I've got that over him. True love trumps a six-figure paycheck every six weeks, at least in my book—although I'm not sure my dear brother would agree.

"Falling in love is an ego-driven distraction," Crash once said to me, long-distance, while I was going through my divorce. "It makes you forget about the real but alleviable suffering going on all around you. That's why finding true love is the ultimate goal in our Facebook-lobotomized land of petty narcissists, instead of doing good. Everyone thinks of true love as a trophy, but it's more often a delusion—another sick symptom of Selfie Nation."

I think he was just in a really bad mood that day. I know I was... Julie had just informed me that she expected monthly spousal support payments, even though she was already living with her smarmy old jeweler.

Crash sets down Trout on the marble floor so he can give Pam a hug. "You're looking great, as always," he says, embracing her. Pam hugs him tight and plants a big wet kiss on that suave bastard's stubbly cheek.

"You, too!" she says, although I can't tell if she means it.

My brother has a doomy urban Viking look that's not always a big hit with the ladies. He lets his unruly blonde hair grow long and he has bruise-colored shadows beneath his dark green eyes that make him look perpetually tired and fraught with concerns. He always comes across as the most serious guy in any room. No one ever looks at him and thinks: *This guy would show me a really great time at Disney World!*

Poor Crash. Now that I think about it, there's no way I'd ever want to trade lives with him. Besides, he's thirteen years older than I am. At 48, Crash's life is more than half over, while I feel like mine is still in the early innings.

"Let's get your stuff upstairs," he says. "Then we'll go out and celebrate Derek's new status as a best-selling author." He grabs Pam's suitcase. "By the way, Pam, I've been watching your UTube videos..." he says to her. "You've been building up quite a fan base, too, haven't you?"

"I'm doing all right, I guess, not counting the death threats," she says. As we ascend in the elevator, Pam explains how she's been getting some unwanted attention from Clonenhoof.

Crash thinks there might be something he can do about that.

Did I happen to mention that Crash's neo-conceptual art projects have made him a kind of folk hero among the vast underground network of genius hackers and human rights advocates known as Anonymous? Well, I should have....

Crash goes by the name Démerder in the art world—French for getting yourself out of the shit: *De-Shitter*. It's amusingly

ironic how famous he's become by refusing to do interviews, refusing to show up at art gallery soirées, and refusing to engage in all the other de rigueur PR bullshit that high-profile artists seem to thrive on.

Démerder is the New York art community's pet recluse—"a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" as Winston Churchill used to say—onto which everyone can project all the weird suspicions that they're too spooked to claim as their own dark thoughts about where our world's headed. It helps that my brother's art takes place at the intersection where deep politics and high strangeness meet in a head-on collision. He might not be into self-promotion, but he's never been afraid to speak out against the Unspeakable.

Aside from *A Black Box For Humanity's Redacted History*—the auto-auctioning meteorite cube that money-mad journalists love to write about—Crash/Démerder's most famous art installation is probably *The Tarot of 9/11: For Mark Lombardi*, which took him seven years to complete. It was first exhibited in 2008 as a homage to Mark Lombardi, an artist who hanged himself (or got lynched by a shadowy cabal) in his Brooklyn apartment in the spring of 2000, right before a major show.

Lombardi had been making artful, incredibly detailed diagrams that documented the financial and political misdeeds of a global criminal overclass—corrupt government officials, military top brass, intelligence agency chiefs, bankers to the Vatican, psychopathic CEOs of soulless corporations, and other well-heeled scum. His work made it clear that the worst offenders of that overclass presented a much greater threat to the health and wealth of the average world citizen than the underworld figures we'd been taught to fear, like the Mafia, Mexican drug cartels, and overweight New Jersey hitmen.

Lombardi had focused on scandals like Iran-Contra, BCCI, Harken Energy, the P2 Lodge, the Savings and Loan Crisis, and the Reagan-era arming of Saddam Hussein. If he'd lived long enough, he almost certainly would have addressed the September 11 attacks. But since Lombardi wasn't around to do that, Crash

(working as Démerder) did it for him, while at the same time expanding the work in scale and taking it to its natural destination: the Internet.

The installation was organized around the twenty-two cards from the Tarot's Major Arcana—which sounds crazy, but somehow Crash made it work. You could log onto Démerder.com and point the camera lens on your Bluetooth-enabled mobile device at any card in the exhibit and it would link to the processable data structures that each card represented. Beginning with The Fool and ending with The World, the installation told the entire story of the 9/11 attacks, from the early planning stages to the tragic aftermath. Utilizing tree charts, sociograms, podcasts, hyperlinked texts, photographs, and scans of original newspaper and magazine sources, *The Tarot of 9/11* showcased the anomalies that the mainstream media had glossed over in its rush to construct a neocon-approved myth explaining how the attacks had happened.

If you were willing to put in the time with *The Tarot of 9/11*, what you came away with was the conviction that there was *absolutely no way* Al Qaeda could have planned and executed the 9/11 attacks without assistance from a criminal overclass that included high-ranking officials in the U.S. military-industrial-intelligence complex.* At the very least, the Bush administration chose to look the other way while the 9/11 attacks were being set

* As with the JFK assassination, any good researcher soon discovers that you don't need to know every detail of the true story to understand that the official story is a nest of festering lies. As Crash once put it to me: "I could tell you the real story behind JFK's assassination, step-by-step—who planned it, who executed it, who covered it up, and how—but you'd never believe me. There are so many conflicting theories out there—and so many dedicated disinformation agents—that the truth will never be known. The criminal overclass counts on that when they're planning the next assassination or false flag terrorism event. The disinfo is baked right in." Patsies are set-up and swiftly silenced; evidence is compromised, mislaid, or destroyed; key witnesses are murdered before they can testify; local police and federal intelligence agencies manipulate the facts in collusion with conspirators; doubles and imposters are deployed to confuse the public; diaries and passports are forged and planted for useful idiots to discover... and it's all been going on since at least 1947, when President Truman sicced the CIA on an unwitting world.

in motion, so it could use the blackmail power of “the terrorist threat” to push through pre-written legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act—which would give the NSA a free pass to direct its Orwellian mass surveillance capabilities at U.S. citizens, and otherwise erode the foundations of freedom once guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

In the post-Snowden era, it’s become obvious that 9/11 and the ensuing loss of privacy was simply a means; influencing our collective behavior was the real goal all along. Democracy becomes a leaden joke when blackmail material on anyone is available to a fascist-leaning national security state in just a few computer keystrokes.

“Here we are...” says Crash, unlocking his front door.

Crash’s apartment is one of those places that make you go *Oh wow!* as you walk in the door. The loft-like, triple-height former ballroom has three tall arched clerestory windows above three sets of French doors opening onto a shallow stone balustraded balcony that overlooks the teeming green rectangle of Bryant Park behind the library—and all of uptown Manhattan beyond. It’s a million-dollar view—*literally*—but at the same time, Crash has made the interior space feel friendly and funky, as if some laid-back hippie lives there (which I guess, in a way, *he is* with his Esalen credentials...).

All the windowsills are lined with lush green houseplants—orchids, ferns, and bonsai trees—in a variety of beautiful, hand-glazed ceramic pots. The pumpkin-colored pine plank floors are unevenly worn from a hundred years of shoes and socks, but they somehow look perfect that way. At the far end of the room, a bird’s eye maple desk and a matching wall unit of shelves contains art books, hardcover fiction, some serious stereo equipment, and the latest and greatest products from Apple. The overall effect is, again, shamolic but somehow perfect.

Across the room from the windows, there’s a custom-built curving copper wall with what appears to be a submarine’s door off to one side: big rivets, rounded edges, a spoked wheel for a handle—all of pure copper. It has the look of a postmodern

architect's pet project, like something Frank Gehry might have drawn on the back of a napkin while tripping on mushrooms and watching *Das Boot*, but Crash designed the thing himself.

Crash walks over to the door and spins the spoked wheel. The door opens. "I thought you guys might like sleeping in here," he says, ushering us inside. "It's the quietest room in the city—my all-purpose Faraday Cage and Orgone Accumulator."

"Cool! You got it built!" I say. Crash had told me he wanted to build the room about a year ago, but I didn't know he'd already finished it. I'd helped him with some of the design and engineering specs in the early stages, but after that it was up to Crash and his New York City contractors to get the job done.

I guess he found some good ones.

If Crash stuck to his original plans, every wall in that room—along with the floor and ceiling—is lined with alternating layers of copper, untreated redwood, a grounded electromagnetic shield, a baffled and suspended layer of cork, another thin layer of crinkled copper foil, and then a final interior surface of redwood. As my eyes adjust to the subdued lighting inside the room, I can see that Crash got the redwood interior right. It's like being inside a gigantic cigar box, without the annoying tobacco smell.

The idea is that the Faraday cage isolates the room from electromagnetic radiation, making it the perfect place to take a break from technology, in addition to providing a safe haven from any nasty electronic eavesdropping. The alternating layers of organic redwood and inorganic copper help the grounded shielding of the Faraday cage do an even better job, but they also conform to the design specs for building an orgone accumulator, as envisioned by the persecuted psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich.

Reich believed that orgone energy is all around us—floating around loose like dust motes in the quantum field, or something. His theory was that a box made of alternating layers of organic and inorganic material could trick orgone into accumulating inside it, sort of like a Chinese finger trap. And orgone, according to Reich, helps fight cancer and provides all kinds of other healthful benefits, so you want as much of it as you can get.

One of the trickier parts of designing the room was to make sure that it had adequate ventilation without compromising the integrity of the Faraday cage and orgone box. Crash had asked for my help with that part, but even after familiarizing myself with the ventilation systems in the NSA's TEMPEST-certified SCIFs (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities), I wasn't sure I'd gotten it right. "Have you been sleeping in here?" I ask Crash, noting the queen-sized bed in the corner.

"Every night," he says. So it appears he's been getting enough oxygen. "You guys should try it. It'll make you feel great."

I've done my own research: William Burroughs had an orgone accumulator, and he said it really enhanced his orgasms. Jack Kerouac wrote in *On the Road* that Burroughs' orgone box was so powerful that it used to send ol' Bill running off to the nearest whorehouse after every use. Others have backed up those libido-boosting claims, although Reich himself downplayed that aspect of orgone accumulation, probably because he was already getting a metric fuck-ton of negative press about stirring up a "cult of sex and anarchy"—as if that were a *bad* thing.

Okay, so maybe Reich was kind of a nutjob—and maybe my brother is a tad eccentric to be following in his footsteps—but pseudoscience and wild conjecture can be fun, don't you think? Orgone, Archons, Loosh, 9/11, JFK... you can have opinions about all that stuff, but you can never be certain you've grasped the truth (unless, perhaps, you're the reptilian overlord in charge of Dick Cheney's brain...).

Like I said, we're here for a fleeting interval and then we're gone. Life sets us up like bowling pins and death knocks us down. In the interim, we witness some things that seem morally indefensible, disturbing, or just plain weird. Most people turn away and try to *unnotice* that stuff. They only see what they want to see—*because life's too short, right?*—but Crash has made a career out of looking deeper, like a samsaric detective.

Granted, he's arrived at some strange conclusions, but who's to say he's wrong? Judging by everything I've seen, I tend to think he's mostly right.

INTRIGUE AT SALON DE NING

Crash has made dinner reservations for us at the Peninsula Hotel's rooftop bar and terrace, Salon de Ning. We're threading our way through the crowded sidewalks along Fifth Avenue—past Saks and the spiky white marble Neo-Gothic edifice that is St. Patrick's Cathedral—when, up ahead, we see a homeless guy in a filthy yellow T-shirt leaning against a pole topped by a red No Standing sign. He's parked himself right between the flagship stores for Versace and Blancpain. A faded red illustration of some decrepit bayou crapstand on the T-shirt's back is accompanied by the perverse business slogan:

Skeezer's Crab Shack

The Best Place To Get Crabs

As we approach him, the homeless guy lets loose with a chirrup of demented birdsong and drops his stained gray sweatpants to his ankles. Joyfully, he raises his wagging hands up toward the sun and engages in some Watusi-style hip thrusting action, as if he's trying to hail a cab with his flapping nutsack and semi-erect dingus. Pam and I step to the right and make a wide arc around the ripe-smelling dick-wagger, but Crash has the

presence of mind to capture some quick HD video with his iPhone and tip the guy twenty bucks.

“With equipment like that, you should have your own web porn franchise,” Crash says with a grin. The homeless guy pulls up his pants and gives him two big thumbs up.

“Well, *that* was interesting...” says Pam as we proceed up the street. “Do you see a lot of homeless flashers around here?”

“More than you might expect,” says Crash. “I should’ve had him sign a model release. Next time, maybe.”

A block farther up, we see the comedian Tracy Morgan leaning on a cane beside a long white Bentley limousine parked at the curb in another No Standing zone in front of a Salvatore Ferragamo store. The star of *30 Rock* and *Saturday Night Live* is talking to a scrum of fans. He looks resplendent in a vivid red-black-and-blue short sleeve shirt and bright white slacks. When he sees Crash walking past, he waves and shouts: “Hey, G.E.!”

Crash walks over a little closer and cordially says, “I’m not G.E., but I’ll tell him you said Hi.”

“You know him?” Tracy asks.

“Yeah, we run in some of the same circles. I’m Gordon. It’s great to see you up and walking around again after that accident.”

“Thanks, man.”

Less than a year ago, a long-distance trucker for Walmart had fallen asleep at the wheel and plowed into Tracy’s limo, killing his best friend and nearly killing Tracy as well. Tracy’s looking pretty good, considering.

We keep walking. We’ve just seen the highs and lows of the New York City class system in a two-block radius—and Crash is talking to everyone. I’m getting the impression that my antisocial brother isn’t quite as antisocial as I’d thought.

“Who’s G.E.?” I ask him.

“G.E. Smith,” Crash answers. “He used to be the bandleader on *Saturday Night Live*, before Tracy started there.”

“How do you know G.E. Smith?” Pam asks, impressed.

“His wife, Taylor, introduced us. She’s close friends with Laylon—my art dealer. You’d like Taylor. She’s really funny and talented, although maybe not quite as funny as G.E.’s first wife. Before Taylor, he was married to Gilda Radner.”

“No way!”

“Yeah, he and Gilda used to live in The Dakota.”

“Where John Lennon got shot,” I fill in for Pam.

“G.E. used to hang out and jam with John Lennon before that happened. He knows almost everyone in the music business: Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Tina Turner, Hall & Oates... he’s played with all of them. He’s an amazing guitarist. Last time I saw him, he was touring with Roger Waters, doing *The Wall*.”

“That’s so cool! And you look like him, huh?”

“I get mistaken for him from time-to-time... him and Duff McKagan, from Guns N’ Roses. It’d probably happen to you, too,” Crash says to me, “if you grew your hair out and moved to New York.”

There’s more to it than that... I think to myself. It’s hard to explain, but after Crash’s art career started taking off, something changed in him. He developed a sort of inner charisma: a weird thickening of his aura, or some added existential weight. Tracy Morgan had it. You can see it in almost every celebrity that you meet in person. Simply put, Crash now looks like someone who should be famous.

And I don’t.

Pam, on the other hand... it’s crazy how much attention she’s been getting in her brand new white short-shorts and her blue spruce halter top. New York is full of beautiful women, but even in Midtown Manhattan my gorgeous girlfriend stands out. I wonder if anyone recognizes her from her UTube channel. That happens sometimes, out on the West Coast.

In just a few more blocks we arrive at the Peninsula Hotel. Crash leads us to a glass doorway to the right of the main lobby entrance and then through a posh, wood-paneled corridor to a semi-hidden express elevator that takes us straight to the roof.

Salon de Ning has a cool, 1930s Shanghai vibe going on. It's a combo of Art Nouveau Paris salon and ultraluxe opium den. The black ceilings are hung with glass-beaded chandeliers and illuminated Chinese silk umbrellas radiating hues of purple, gold, and orange. The interior décor features a lot of striped satin pillows, elaborately carved oriental screens, Venetian mirrors, Persian carpets, Moroccan lanterns, wingback chairs in button tufted purple velvet, and a glossy grand piano over by a wall of plate glass windows that look out onto the terrace.

The terrace itself is dotted with café tables surrounded by red-cushioned metal chairs. There's also a bed at one end—or I guess you could more accurately call it a cushioned platform. That's where we end up sitting. The view is incredible. We're twenty-three stories up, surrounded by skyscrapers. Just a few blocks away, I can see Philip Johnson's postmodern AT&T Building with its famous "Chippendale" ornamental top. I don't know the names of the other buildings; I see a Citibank logo on an office tower two blocks south, at 666 Fifth Avenue, but aside from that one—with its Antichrist implications—they're all awe-inspiring in their way.

Human beings get up to some amazing shit when they're crowded together in an urban environment.

Among the crowd on the packed terrace, I spot a famous female architect and at least two well-known actors. A tall, slender waitress sashays over to us, threading her way past all the other diners, drinkers, and gawkers. Her long black hair is in a complicated braid and she's wearing a sleek teal kimono embroidered with gold silk. In a honeyed British accent, she asks if she can bring us something to drink.

"I'll have a Ning Sling," says Crash.

"That sounds like a Dr. Seuss drink," I say. "What's in it?"

The waitress answers: “Hendricks Gin, some fresh mint, passion fruit—”

“—and the Bitter Tears of Cindy Lou Who,” Crash finishes for her.

“Sounds great! That’s what I’ll have,” says Pam.

“Maybe I should just have a beer.”

“C’mon, live a little...” Crash encourages me, unaware of my vomitous contretemps with tequila several weeks earlier.

“Okay. Make it three Ning Slings then, I guess,” I say to the waitress, promising myself that I’ll only have one and then switch to beer or mineral water.

Before she leaves, the waitress pauses in front of Pam with a nervous look on her pale, pretty face and says, all in a rush:

“Sorry, but I have to ask: ‘Are you Pam From Siam?’”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Pam confirms, looking a bit surprised. “How’d you know?”

“There’s a gentleman at the bar who’d like to meet you.” The waitress leans in close to Pam’s ear and whispers: “*It’s Conye Best!*” Then she hurries off.

“Conye Best wants to meet me?” It comes out of Pam’s mouth sounding more like a question than a statement, but the waitress is already gone.

“Hey, stranger things have happened,” says Crash. “I used to be Mariah Carey’s personal photo retoucher back when I still had to work for a living.”

“What was she like?” Pam asks him.

“I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement with her, so I can’t tell you,” says Crash, but we can infer from his body language that their professional relationship wasn’t exactly warm and cozy.

At that moment, a collective spike in awareness shudders through the crowd—similar in effect to a herd of wildebeests suddenly becoming aware of a lion in their midst—as Conye Best steps onto the terrace and makes his way over to us. He’s relaxed

and smiling, wearing Bengal-striped pajamas and leopard skin slippers, as if Salon de Ning is just an extension of his bedroom. He's radiating that inner fame charisma I was thinking about earlier, but on him it's more like a supernova, making Tracy Morgan seem like a mere jester in the court where Conye sits on the throne.

"Oh shit..." Pam says under her breath.

My thoughts exactly. Conye Best has a reputation for arrogance that's almost frightening in its intensity. He considers himself rap music's most successful innovator and biggest star—and he has over twenty Grammys to prove it. In interviews and during his legendary non sequitur rants from the stage, he's been known to favorably compare himself to Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Picasso, Andy Warhol, Michael Jackson, Jimi Hendrix, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, Howard Hughes, Nike, Oogle, Jesus, and even the Great Pyramid of Giza.

"Pam From Siam..." he says, extending his hand, "you should be what I am: *famous*."

"Hi, Conye. Nice to meet you," says Pam, shaking hands with him while remaining seated.

"I've been watching your videos on UTube. You're dope, girl. So dope."

"Uhm, thanks?"

Conye's voice is not what I would have expected. It's mild and almost, well... *gentlemanly* is the word I'd use. The famous wrathful eyes, the tight fade, and the severe goatee are all there, but Conye seems to be in an expansive mood. He says to Pam:

"God's little joke on me—as an intellect who doesn't like to read a lot—is like, I'll say some superphilosophical shit, but I'll say it in the wrong way. I'll use the wrong word, so it goes from being really special to completely retarded. But you get the words right every time, bitch. I love how you tell the world that mad shit about quantum physics and semiotics."

"Yeah, well, I went to college..." Pam says with a rueful grin. "And I get a lot of help from my boyfriend here, Derek."

I stand up to shake Conye's hand, but as I'm reaching toward him he turns to a passing waitress and says, "Can you top off my mai tai over here?" I let my hand fall back, feeling slighted.

Pam presses on with her introductions: "Derek's a best-selling author and an architect. And this is his brother, Crash."

Crash has the good sense to stay off his feet. He just leans back on the cushioned platform and gives Conye a polite wave. Conye nods his head in Crash's direction, but doesn't say a word. He only has eyes for Pam.

Specifically, for her tits.

Pam seems to think that Conye should be more impressed with the company she keeps. Without pausing to consider all the ramifications of compromising my brother's anonymity, she says, "Crash is a neo-conceptual artist. People know him as Démerder in the art world."

That does it. Conye is jolted out of his laser-like focus on my girlfriend's chest. He turns to Crash and says, "No shit? You're Démerder? I saw your last show at The Vault. Motherfucking blew me away."

"I've been blown away by your stuff, too," Crash says with laid-back diplomatic aplomb. "That 'Dark-Skinned Skinhead' video you did with Nick Knight was the angriest blast of surrealism I've seen in a good long time. H.R. Giger would've been proud."

I'm not so sure that's a compliment, but Conye seems to take it that way. He sits down on the platform between Crash and Pam and says, "Nick's the guy who told me to go see your show. Him and George Condo—they're both fans. They've been trying to figure out who you are for years."

"I like to keep a low profile," says Crash, "unlike you."

"Yeah, fame's a bitch... it's definitely not for everyone," says Conye, laughing and flashing the diamonds that have replaced his bottom row of front teeth. "Becoming famous is like being catapulted into space—sometimes without a space suit. So many people combust, suffocate, or get lost. But to have an anchor to

other astronauts and to make a little space family, like I'm doing with Limn... that makes it easier."

"How's Limn doing these days?" Pam asks, maybe to remind Conye that he doesn't need to be staring so hard at her boobs if he has Limn Lardassian's exponentially more famous boobs back at home.

"She's pregnant again," Conye says with obvious pride.

"Congratulations!" all three of us say at once.

"We haven't told anyone in the media yet, so keep that to yourselves for now, all right? If you keep my secrets, I'll keep yours."

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Crash says. "I forgot to ask Pam not to mention my art career to anyone."

"I'm not just anyone," says Conye.

"No, you're definitely not."

Pam busts in on the mutual bromance that Conye and my brother seem to be embarking upon. "Do you mind if I ask what's up with the pajamas? Turnbull & Asser?"

"Yeah, the Sea Island line. You got a good eye for PJs there."

"I just read the name on the buttons," Pam confesses. "They're super-nice though. But I'm wondering why you're wearing them in public."

"I'm pajama rich, baby. When you're at the top of your game like I am—when you're the emperor—you don't need no damn clothes."

"Oh. Well, that explains it then."

"In the music business," Conye elaborates, "I'm pajama rich like Nick Nolte, Julian Schnabel, and Hugh Hefner are in acting, painting, and porn. I am the Number One living and breathing rock star. I'm going down as a legend, whether you like me or not. I'm the new Jim Morrison. The new Kurt Cobain."

“That’s a lot of people to be all at once,” I say. *The rumors of Conye’s phenomenal arrogance have not been exaggerated...* I think to myself.

“You know Julian?” Crash asks him, probably to deflect attention from my sarcasm. “I met him once at this place called the Russian T&A Room, out in Brooklyn. We talked art, but he seemed more interested in the Ukrainian go-go dancers that night. It was his birthday.”

Conye tries to play it cool, but I can tell he’s excited to be talking about this stuff with my brother. “Sure, I hang with Julian,” he says. “I’ve been doing my mega-art crash thing for a while now. I’m a trained fine artist. You probably didn’t know that. I went to the American Academy of Art on a full scholarship.”

“Wasn’t your first album called *The College Dropout*?” asks Pam, just to inject a bit of reality into the conversation.

“Yeah, all my study time was going into making *sonic* paintings, so I had to drop out,” Conye explains. “That broke my mother’s heart, but she got over it when she saw how successful I was with my music. My mom, Lavonda, was a university Physics professor. My father was a photojournalist and a Black Panther. Both of my parents were educated, and both of them were always telling me about the manipulation of the media.” Turning to Crash, he says, “That’s what’s so dope about *The Fed and the Vampire Squid*... you showed how the private banking cartel behind the Federal Reserve ganged up with big media and Wall Street to rip-off this entire country.”

Crash says, “My brother’s written a lot about that and related topics. You might like his books.”

Conye heaves out a dismissive, diamond-filtered sigh. “Sometimes people write novels and they just be so wordy and so self-absorbed. I like to get information from doing stuff like actually talking to people and living real life. I am a proud non-reader of books.”

"Some people might feel the same way about rap music..." I say as a waitress approaches and hands Conye a mai tai. A second waitress passes around our three Ning Slings. I raise my glass. "Let's raise a toast to the douchebags."

Conye glares in my direction. "Are you tryin' to level me?" he asks.

"I was just quoting a line from my favorite song of yours: 'Underway'."

"*I know the damn song.* What I'm asking is: 'Are you leveling me?'"

"I don't even know what that means," I say. "But if you want the truth, I was just pointing out that your attitude toward books is a little dickish."

"*Dickish!* Fuck you, bro! I'll show you dickish—extra hard!"

"I think what Derek's trying to say..." Crash starts in, but I interrupt him:

"No, I've got this." I turn to stare down Conye, taking the full brunt of his hostility. "Look, I know I just met you—and I realize it's insane to court the wrath of the great and powerful Conye Best—"

"Damn straight!"

"—but you're a cultural spokesman. Kids want to *be* you. If you go around saying you're a proud non-reader, some of those same kids might decide that learning how to read isn't worth the effort."

"I'm not saying they shouldn't learn how to read."

"And then, when they grow up and realize that being proud non-readers didn't turn them into up-and-coming Conye Bests, it'll be too late for them."

"I'm not saying that! All I'm saying is: I am not a fan of books. I would never want a book's autograph."

“Again, other people probably think the same way about rap and hip-hop—especially gangster rap that glorifies rape and violence and getting wasted.”

“That’s not me.”

“I’m not saying it is... although you have to admit that the lyrics to some of your songs—like ‘Monstrous’—are pretty fucked up.”

Conye raps: “*My presence is a present / So kiss my asshole, peasant.*”

“Actually, I was thinking of the verse that comes right before that—the one that goes: ‘*She keeps her pussy in a mummy box / so Beezos bruised her esophagus.*’ And I’m sorry... I don’t want to come off sounding like Tipper Gore. I’m not into censorship. But discouraging someone from acquiring the gift of literacy is also a kind of censorship. And willful ignorance is self-censorship.”

“*Censorship!* Who said anything about censorship?”

“I did. My books—like my brother’s art—explain how people are being exploited in ways they might not even be aware of. But they’ll *stay* unaware if they can’t read books.”

“What if I put that same information in a song—or Pam makes a video out of it? Then even *more* people will be aware of it.” Conye tries to fist-bump with Pam, but she pretends to not know how fist-bumping works.

“I’m guessing you might have some trouble setting *The Fed and the Vampire Squid* to music,” Crash says to Conye. “Same thing with Pam making a fifteen-minute video out of one of Derek’s 600-page novels.”

“No chance,” says Pam, sucking on her Ning Sling like it’s an oxygen mask on a plummeting plane.

“Six hundred pages! You *are* a wordy motherfucker!” Conye is smiling at me now. He seems to be coming around.

Whew!

“Reading is just one way for people to learn about things,” Pam says, putting her hand on Conye’s fist-bumping forearm, “but you don’t want to close off that avenue. Books have a pretty good history of conveying information.”

“I’m down with that,” says Conye. “Look, I know we were born into a broken world. We should all be part of the cleanup crew—in any way we can—even if all you can do is write lame-ass books. I want my kids to live in a truthful world, not a world driven by brands and lying-ass corporations.”

“So let’s raise a toast to *taking down* the douchebags,” says Crash, raising his glass.

“To taking down the assholes,” Conye seconds, “and the scumbags.”

“And the scamming jerk-offs that never take work off,” I say, rounding out Conye’s “Underway” lyrics.

“I’m starting to appreciate your fucked-up flyness, Derek...” Conye says, finally shaking my hand. “But I still think your girl is more dope. No offense.”

“None taken,” I say, looking at Pam. “I’ve always thought my girl was dope as hell.”

“*Awww...* now you’re making me blush,” says Pam, looking down at her lap so that her long black hair screens her face, “even though I’m still not sure what *dope* means.”

THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER, ROC-A-FELLA

I've never been good with gin.

Aside from my one Trout-sullying margarita bender, all of my worst drunken rampages have been initiated by gin. It goes down like water for me. I don't even notice the alcohol content. I'll be cruising along, feeling fine—barely even buzzed—and then, all of a sudden, I'll find myself transformed into a sarcastic asshole on an unstoppable quest for adventure with a cartoon coyote in charge of my bones.

Several hours after Conye introduces himself to us on the terrace of the Peninsula Hotel—somewhere around my fifth Ning Sling—my inner Wile E. Coyote makes its presence known. Why Conye has continued to hang out with us for all that time remains a mystery. I would have thought he'd have better things to do. But Conye seems to enjoy flirting with Pam, he's unquestionably interested in talking about neo-conceptual art with Crash, and he might even be finding a perverse satisfaction in his verbal sparring with me. Who knows what motivates a creative genius like Conye Best?

For the past few minutes, I've been ranting to Conye about the grizzly bears in the Central Park Zoo, how they've usurped the space once devoted to the zoo's more beloved polar bears—the same polar bears that were featured prominently (and lewdly)

in my last novel. When I notice a full moon rising above the skyscrapers, it inspires my coyote alter ego to stand up and howl that we need to go break into the zoo (“*Right the fuck now!*”) so I can let the grizzlies know what I think of them.

“They’re low-class bears,” I say, giving voice to my gin-fueled outrage. “*Hoodrat* bears. They eat out of garbage cans. But those polar bears... they were like the Lardassians.”

“Do you even know what you’re saying?” Conye asks me, shaking his head in disbelief.

“They were bear royalty, goddamit! But those grizzlies are scum. And I’ll tell them that, right to their faces. I’ll really give those bears something for their tiny little balled-up-sock brains to think about. Then I’ll go jump in the sea lion tank to cool off.”

“You might not want to do that,” Crash cautions me. “Male sea lions can weigh up to half a ton—and they’re vicious sea predators. If one of them perceives you as a threat, it won’t hesitate to drown you at the bottom of that tank and eat your face off.”

“Fuck that. I swim with sea lions all the time in Morro Bay. C’mon!” I insist, “let’s walk to the zoo. It’s not that far.”

“The zoo’s closed, Derek,” Pam says, rapping her knuckles on the side of my head, as if she could knock some sense into me.

“We’ve got Conye with us! The security guards’ll let us in.”

“Hold on there, grizzly-hater. *Up here*, I’m Conye Best. Everyone knows that. But *down there*—in the park, at night—the N.Y.P.D. might mistake me for just another crazy black man in pajamas. I don’t want to end up like Eric Garner, with my face on a T-shirt saying: *I can’t breathe!*”

“We saw a guy like that earlier today,” I say. “He was trying to hail a taxi with his dick.”

“But he wasn’t wearing *Turnbull & Asser* pajamas,” Crash differentiates. “I’ve got the video, if you need proof.”

“Lemme see that shit...” says Conye, reaching for Crash’s proffered iPhone. His drink-reddened eyes go wide. “*Damn!* That nigga’s hung!”

“*Pythonic* is the word that came to my mind,” I say.

“See? That why reading too many books is bad for you,” Conye scolds me. “No one calls his dick *pythonic*.”

“What do you call yours?” Pam asks him with a tipsy grin.

“*Beezos*. I call my dick Beezos, baby. Named my last album after him.”

“Oh. So *that’s* what that was about.”

“‘Dark-Skinned Skinhead...’ ‘I Am Yr God...’ I should’ve guessed,” says Crash.

“I *am* a god,” Conye says with a touch too much smugness.

“So is everyone else,” Crash coolly replies. “Existence is just a game where the stakes seem real. We put on these human suits—these *animal* suits, really—so we can experience this world.”

“There’re times when I *feel* like an animal, that’s for sure,” Conye interjects.

“Me too,” I say. At least we have that in common.

“According to Plato and some of the philosophers that came after him—like the Neoplatonists and the Gnostics—we come here with two souls,” my brother elucidates: “An immortal soul that seeks union with the divine spirit, or True Self; and a mortal soul that identifies with the False Self and its attachments to this material world. The mortal soul is ‘subject to terrible and irresistible affections... tethered like a beast untamed in the belly.’ But when we die, if we’ve become enlightened during our time on Earth, we shed our mortal soul so our immortal soul can merge with our True Self. And each True Self is a ray of divine light emanating from ‘the One’—the True God. So in that sense, we’re all gods.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Conye says. “I didn’t say we’re *all* gods. Just me.”

"I know..." Crash says. "In your song, you want people to hurry up with your nuru massage, hurry up with your 'French-ass' croissants, hurry up with your interracial ménage à trois. It's a song of berserk entitlement. An anthem to the False Self."

"Doesn't sound so great when you put it that way, does it?" I say, courting Conye's wrath again, just for fun. A line recurs to me from a short story collection by Wells Tower that I left back at home on my nightstand: *I carry a little imp inside me whose ambrosia is my brother's wrath.*

"Fuck you, Derek," says Conye. "Let's go to the fuckin' zoo. I wanna see your lily-white face get chewed off by a sea lion."

He asks a passing waitress for our check. The tab comes to over \$800. Conye generously offers to pick it up, but Crash stays his hand and throws down his own carbon-black American Express Centurion Card with the shrug of someone who has enough money in the bank to truly not give a shit about \$25 cocktails.

I'm a long way from being there myself.

"Guys, maybe we should just go home..." Pam suggests when we're standing out in front of the hotel between the two white marble Chinese guardian lions flanking the stairway to the lobby. "I'm not dressed for walking around at night. I'm starting to get cold."

Conye hands his keys to a waiting valet. "Get the Porsche out of the damn garage," he says, sending the valet scurrying. Then he puts an arm around Pam's waist and says: "I've got a Versace coat in there that'll keep you nice and toasty."

Some goofy-looking old guy wearing a curly black wig raises a Nikon with a long telephoto lens and snaps off a few frames as he walks past us. The rapid strobes leave an afterimage on my vision that only goes away after one of the other valets shakes his fist at the lone paparazzo and chases him off.

"We're not driving, are we?" asks Pam with a glaze of real fear her eyes, perhaps recalling the aftermath of Princess Diana's crazy paparazzi car chase in Paris.

“Nah. We’ll walk. It’s only a few blocks. I just wanted that guy to get my coat.”

A few moments later, the valet pulls up in Conye’s matte-black Porsche Panamera.

“*Beezos*...” I say, recalling the Freudian notion that a car can be thought of as a psychological extension of a man’s weenie. “That thing looks like the Batmobile, only cooler.”

“Oh *wow*, Conye!” Pam says as he opens the Porsche’s rear hatch and whips out a luxurious camel hair coat. “Do you think it’ll fit?” He holds it open for her as she cautiously backs into it. Then she lets out a brief, laughing gasp as Conye roughly grabs her shoulder to push it deeper into the silken sleeve.

I’m starting to get jealous. *Where’s Limn Lardassian when you need her?*

“Is it true that Brett Easton Ellis is writing a screenplay based on your life?” I ask Conye, getting in a little dig with the covert reference to *American Psycho*, Ellis’s celebrated (and reviled) novel about a psychotic materialist on a killing spree in Manhattan.

Conye doesn’t rise to my subtle insult. “How’d you know?” he asks me. “I was just talking to Brett, during Paris Fashion Week, about doing a movie based on *Beezos*.”

No wonder he’s not insulted... it’s true! I think to myself.

“We’ll see how it shakes out,” Conye continues. “He also got me thinking that Easton could be a great name for my next kid. Easton-Estonian Best—it’s dope, right?”

“It goes with South-by-Southwest,” Crash says to be kind, referring to the name of Conye’s first-born child.

Conye hands the valet a hundred dollar tip. “Park it again,” he says. “We’re walking.”

On the way to the park, I ask Conye if the rumors are true that he and Jay Z are Illuminati puppets. I can’t seem to stop baiting him, even though Pam is back at my side, hugging me close as we walk past the gilded doorways of Henri Bendel and

Harry Winston; past the sleek glass storefronts of Prada, Piaget, and Bvlgari; and past the famed window displays of Bergdorf Goodman (always mobbed around Christmas). For some dumb reason, it really pisses me off that while I'm hugging Pam, I'm also hugging Conye's über-expensive coat.

"You believe that shit?" Conye scoffs at me, as if I'm an unhinged moron. "Why would the Illuminati care about a couple of rappers? That Professor Griff shit ain't real, bro."

I've run across Professor Griff's name before. Conye is referring to the former "Minister of Information" for the old school hip-hop group, Public Enemy.

"There's no worldwide network of people who've sold their souls to the devil," he continues. "No blood sacrifices that have to be made if you want to join the Twenty Million Dollar Club. If there *was* an Illuminati, it'd be more like the energy companies—not celebrities that gave their life to music and who are pinpointed as decoys for people who really run the world."

"So there's no truth to the rumor that the same big investors behind for-profit prisons have been in bed with the big rap and hip-hop producers since around 1991?"

"That's more insane Professor Griff shit," Conye tells me. "They kicked him out of Public Enemy for a reason, y'know...."

"At least Public Enemy makes socially conscious music," I say, too drunk and obstreperous to censor my thoughts. "Supposedly, the for-profit prison investors—companies like BlackRock and Vanguard Group—have been backing your albums and pimping your songs to the dozen or so major media conglomerates that control ninety percent of what Americans watch, read, and listen to. In exchange, you guys were supposed to act like superfly criminal kingpins and crank out music glorifying drugs and violence and doing prison time, so impressionable young black men would act out and get their sorry asses landed in jail. Something like one-in-three young black men will be incarcerated at some point during their lives, according the latest stats. Which, of course, keeps the for-profit prison system growing, making the investors rich and happy."

“I’ve heard those rumors. That’s just more crazy shit put out by the haters,” Conye says as we come up on The Plaza Hotel with its constipated French Renaissance château-style façade all lit up in gold.

“Rich people would never do anything like that?” asks Crash, just to clarify. “Profit at the expense of low-income communities of color?” Rich people are no doubt swarming all around us at that very moment, as we pass alongside the hotel’s red-carpeted stairway, sheltered by a huge black iron canopy ornamented with gilt swags, scrolls, and fleurs-de-lis.

“My parents taught me that AIDS was a man-made disease placed in Africa, just like crack was placed in black communities to break up the Black Panthers. So yeah, I’m sure rich white people fuck over poor ‘communities of color’ all the time,” Conye says. “They’d just never *ask us* to help them do it. We’re black, for one thing, so they don’t trust us.”

“Uhm, Conye?” says Pam, very politely tapping his shoulder. “What about Obama? Or Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice? They played ball.”

“I mean in general,” Conye replies. “Black people don’t have the kind of old money connections that rich white people can tap into. The world’s becoming less racist, but there’s still a really big class war. There’s a real separation of the classes and the masses. And the other thing is: we’re *celebrities*. We don’t run anything. We’re the face of brands. We have to compromise what we say in lyrics so we don’t lose money on our contracts.”

“But that’s kind of the point...” I say. “What if gangster rap was compromised from the very start—and made popular because it was *serving an agenda*?”

“I know a lot of those guys: Suge Knight, N.W.A., Ice-T.... Their only agenda was to make money.”

“Again, kind of the point: synchronized mass media coverage controls what gets popular in America. The statistic I’ve read is that less than 250 media executives are responsible for the media intake of nearly 300 million Americans. Time Warner, Viacom,

Clear Channel, Disney—and now Glamazon and Oogle... they manufacture celebrities. You don't think corporations like that have a say in what kind of rap gets promoted?"

"*Fuck!* Can we just let it go? If you need to convince yourself that I joined the Illuminati, I can't stop you. I already said it in a song." Conye raps for us: "*Sold my soul to the Illuminati, that's a shitty deal / Least it came with some shiny toys, like a Happy Meal.*"

"Okay, I'm sorry..." I say. "I shouldn't be giving you such a hard time. I just wanted to know what you thought about all that stuff, since you're in a position to know. I don't really think your chain is being yanked by the Illuminati."

"As if I'd tell you, if I was balls deep in that evil shit," Conye sneers. "Maybe I sit at the table and eat roasted babies with Rupert Murdoch and Jerry Hall. What are you, a priest?"

Whoa... Conye's having a Linda Blair moment, I think to myself, recalling Linda's little possessed head spinning around while she spewed green puke in *The Exorcist*.

"I'm just a concerned citizen," I say, trying to defuse the situation, "who happens to be extremely drunk."

"You and me both, bro..." says Conye, putting a hand on my shoulder—friendly again. I'm finding his schizoid whipsawing between different personas a bit unnerving. Friendly Conye says, "You feel like smoking a blunt? It might take the edge off."

We've just entered the park. There's no way I should be getting high on top of the massive drunk I already have going on, but a part of me really wants to be able to tell people that I smoked a blunt with Conye Best. It's probably a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"Screw it. Let's do it," I say. "Why not?"

Conye has already produced a perfectly rolled joint from some secret stash and he's sparking it up. After taking a deep, crackling hit, he offers it to Pam.

"None for me, thanks," she says. "I couldn't handle being stoned right now."

“Crash?”

“I haven’t smoked since my twenties, but thanks, anyway.”

“Derek, my man! I know you’ll partake.”

How could I refuse, after that?

Conye laughs and passes me the joint—almost a roach now, after his monster hit. I inhale gingerly. The pungent cannabis smoke hits my nostrils with a musky punch. My throat goes immediately numb. There’s a sweetish chemical aftertaste, like DMT and burnt toffee. I’m no connoisseur of weed, but Conye’s smoke seems more potent than anything I’ve had before.

“Bear down on that bitch,” Conye advises me.

I suck on the joint hard enough to make its tip glow cherry red in the dark. I can feel the smoke invading the deepest parts of my lungs. When I cough it out, the smoke’s thick sinuous tendrils glow greenish-white under the park’s lamplight like a shot of radioactive squid ink from Cthulhu’s parrot-beaked maw.

“Now that’s more like it!” Conye says with undisguised glee. He takes the joint back and affixes it to a roach clip on his key ring. After a few fierce inhalations, the roach no longer interests him. Conye shakes it loose from the clip and crushes the tiny ember beneath his leopard skin slipper.

We keep walking, taking a detour down a mysterious path to our left—tree-shadowed, haloed with gas lamps. Soon, I start to regret what I’ve done. A skull-numbing headrush is descending on me with an invisible fury. It seems to be knocking out my nerve-endings, one-by-one. After a few minutes, it feels like I’m trudging through thin cold soup in anti-gravity boots. I am so fucking high that it’s terrifying. My every step is accompanied by a spasm of vertigo, like that feeling you get when you lean out the window of a tall skyscraper and think about falling.

I’m a moon-mad moonwalker blown across the galaxy on an interstellar breeze.

I try to just go with it, but I’m afraid that if I let the high wash through me without fighting it, I’ll pass out on my feet.

Whatever was in that joint, it's like no drug I've ever smoked before. I'm starting to hallucinate. Weird yellow and blue fractals are frothing at the edge of my vision. I hear a phantom hyena cursing in Aramaic through cackling laughter. Then the hyena coughs and retches, like it has a bone caught in its throat.

We've apparently taken the long way around to the zoo. Somehow, during our stoned meandering, Conye has led us to the top of the grand terrace overlooking Bethesda Fountain, with its glum winged angel looking earthward through the moonlight. There's a strong smell of creosote and horseshit in the air. In the lake beyond the fountain, I see a long, hearse-black gondola slicing through the water, poled by a hulking gondolier who could easily pass for Charon on the River Styx. It's such an uncanny, Felliniesque sight that I have to ask the others if I'm actually seeing it.

"You're seeing it, all right," Pam assures me. "What's that guy doing out there, so late at night?"

"I bet he got hired by some rich folks to take them out for a midnight cruise," Conye answers her. He throws his arms wide in a King of the World gesture. "When you're rich, the rules for everyone else don't apply."

"Except for dying," Crash observes. "No matter how rich you get, you still have to die... although I hear Elon Musk and Ray Kurzweil are working on getting around that."

I recall that Elon Musk had recently written a fawning puff piece about Conye to accompany the rapper's portrait on the cover of *Time* magazine as top dog on its list of "The 100 Most Influential People." Elon had used the term "a pop-culture juggernaut" to describe Conye, which struck me as a blatant act of journalistic fellatio from one business titan to another—a hearty *We're famous, bro! Now let's suck each other off in the press so our brands keep flyin' high! Tesla and Roc-A-Fella forever, baby!*

It's my personal belief that if the man on the street were to actually perceive the true reality behind the news, there would be a sudden uptick in public lynchings of the rich and famous. Not that I think that should happen to Conye or Elon, both creative

innovators in their respective fields whom I grudgingly respect. But could the world do with fewer self-styled titans of finance, industry, and government who feel entitled to exploit the masses, poison the environment, and screw over our grandchildren for the sake of short-term profits?

You bet.

“That’ll end up being another class system thing...” Conye says to my brother while I’m thinking about *Time* and titans. “The rich will live forever, while the poor die around them like diseased monkeys.”

My high seems to be stabilizing. I feel like I can function again, although I’m seeing crazy-colored auras everywhere—especially on Pam, Crash, and Conye. I say to them, “Wouldn’t it be ironic if the rich went to all that trouble to live forever and it turned out Aldous Huxley was right?... *this world is some other planet’s hell.*”

“What do you mean, this world is hell?” Conye asks me.

“Just what I said. Some people—like Aldous Huxley and the Gnostics and Philip K. Dick—believed that life on Earth is hell... that we’ve incarnated into a spiritual prison system. Pam and I have been working on a video about it.”

Pam nods her head. “Archons and Loosh...” she says, as if that might mean something to Conye.

“Archons and *what?*”

“*Loosh.*”

We turn away from the fountain and head into the Mall—the long pedestrian promenade that runs beneath a quadruple-rowed stand of American elms across the road from Bethesda Terrace. Pam starts explaining Archons and Loosh to Conye. She does a much better job of it than I could, in my drug-and-drink-addled state.

When Pam concludes her lecture, Conye says: “So Archons are like the chief devils in the Illuminati. And Loosh is like that

new Drake song, where he raps about people tryin' to drain him of his energy."

"Exactly!"

"I haven't heard that new Drake song... have you?" I ask in an aside to Crash.

"Not yet, but it sounds like something we should check out."

"It's called 'Energy'—but it might've been more dope if he'd called it 'Loosh'..." Conye muses. "Maybe I'll do that one."

"You should," Pam encourages him.

"I don't think this is hell, though."

"You wouldn't," I say to Conye. "Things are going pretty good for you right now... but life is long—and things can always get worse."

We saunter along the bench-lined promenade beneath the dark, cathedral-like canopy of American elms. The elms' branches are all tinged in faintly glowing cerulean from my stoned perspective. We're entering a section of the park called the Literary Walk, a setting known to inspire deep thoughts, as Conye is about to demonstrate:

"Here's what I think..." he says. "One time I was at the dentist's office and they gave me nitrous gas. I guess that's my version of Steve Jobs and his LSD trip. While I was vibing out in there, I had this first thought: *What is the meaning of life?* And then I thought: *To give*. But when you give someone something, should they give you something in return? And I thought: *No*. We don't have to expect to be compensated by the person we give to. *Just give*. The reward is in the deed itself. The times that I've looked like a crazy person—when I was screaming at an interviewer or screaming from the stage—all I was screaming was, 'Help me to help more! I've given all I've got. I've gone into fucking debt. *It's all I've got to give!* But if I had a little bit more opportunity, I could give so much more..."

"...after first creaming off enough to pay for your matte-black Porsche and your 'French-ass' croissants," I finish for him.

Conye locks his wrathful eyes on me. They gleam red like the pupils of a B-movie vampire. “Do you think that’s your job, to be always bustin’ my nuts?” he asks me.

“I think it’s my job to keep lucky devils like you honest,” I say, although I’m not sure that’s possible.

“A man’s gotta eat and have a ride,” he retorts.

“Next you’ll be telling me Limn Lardassian was just the homely Estonian girl next door.” In my hallucination, Conye’s eyes are now piercing red lasers, frying everything in their path. And he’s getting bigger. Like, bigger in the way that the Incredible Hulk gets bigger.

“Don’t insult my wife!”

“How is that insulting your wife?” Crash asks Conye.

“Stay out of this, Crash! This is just between me and your rude lil’ bro.”

“Can we all just chill out a little?” Pam pleads.

Conye focuses his blazing laser eyes on the nearby statue of Fitz-Greene Halleck, a tall bronze lump of mediocre poet perched on a granite pedestal beside a path that veers away from the promenade toward the zoo. Sparks fly off the poet’s foppish 19th-century sideburns as his face heats to a pinkish-orange glow and begins to drip molten goo. The effect reminds me of Ernest Borgnine’s face melting into the Baphomet visage of a slimy satanic goat in a crappy drive-in horror movie I saw when I was sixteen—*The Devil’s Rain*.

“Fuck that ‘*can we chill*’ shit!” the Death Star rapper roars.

I guess that answers Pam’s question.

I take off at a run down the path toward the zoo, ducking and weaving to avoid Conye’s laser hate-gaze. Conye runs after me. Pam shouts my name, but I don’t dare turn around.

Up ahead, I see an arched brick tunnel under a bridge. It’s shadowy and spooky-looking—like trolls might live under there—but my thinking is that if I can just get inside it, I can drop and roll. Then Conye will trip over me in the dark,

allowing me to get up and run back the other way, toward Pam and Crash. The three of us can then book ass out of the park, away from Psycho-Conye and his weaponized eyes.

Even while I'm running, it occurs to me that I'm probably just tripping my brains out. Conye might have no intention of killing me at all. I find myself thinking that if I had access to a fire extinguisher full of Thorazine, I'd spray it into Conye's face and then my own, hoping at least one of us would come to our senses.

I'm a fast sprinter when I'm terrified. As I enter the tunnel, I slow down enough to let Conye catch up with me. Then I drop and roll, as planned, but my plan doesn't work. Conye has quick reflexes and enough athletic grace to leap right over me. He sticks his landing—like a cool-headed Olympic gymnast coming off the parallel bars—then he turns around and picks me up by the armpits. Aside from his glowering red eyes, he's even blacker than the tunnel's surrounding darkness. He's like an African-American Incredible Hulk whose DNA got mixed up in a Cronenbergian telepod with a really pissed-off Komodo dragon.

"What the hell's your problem, D?" Conye asks me. His voice echoes like crazy off the tunnel's brickwork.

I'm fumbling for an answer when he thrusts his staticky arm deep into my solar plexus. I gasp as I feel the life force draining out of me into the black hole that is Conye. I've never felt such bodily weakness. It's beyond my worst hangover. I can't even muster the strength to raise my arms, much less push Conye away from me.

In a flash, I understand everything.

It hits me like one of Robert Monroe's astral thought-balls, conveying imagery, experience, history, and intuited language in one instantaneous, information-dense moment:

Conye Best is a hip-hop Faust. Like all celebrities who've (*often unknowingly*) made deals with the Archons, he's a vampiric black sinkhole for Loosh. (*In rapid-fire succession, I'm shown publicity stills of John Wilkes Booth, Fatty Arbuckle, Errol Flynn, Joan*

Crawford, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson, Nicholas Cage, Tom Cruise, Madonna, Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, among countless others.) All Archon-affiliated celebrities are swirling tornadoes of negative demonic energy (I'm shown a clip from a Looney Tunes cartoon of a wound-up Tasmanian Devil), sucking up Loosh from the people around them and funneling it down into a vortex that feeds the Archons on the Other Side. (I'm shown an inverted quasar and terrible spider-like beings feeding off a rain of black glutinous goo in an alien antiverse.) Live concerts, Broadway shows, sporting events (etc.) allow those same celebrities to siphon off massive amounts of psyshevoltage from their audience, providing the Archons with the Loosh equivalent of an all-you-can-eat buffet. (I'm shown another rapid-fire montage that alternates between rock concert footage and human sacrifice rituals: I watch a guy getting stabbed at that infamous Rolling Stones concert at Altamont; some Aztec or Mayan asshole using an obsidian dagger to cut out the heart of a virgin on the steps of Teotihuacán's Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl; people being trampled to death at the 1979 Who concert at Riverfront Coliseum in Ohio; Saint Peter—or someone like him—crucified on an upside down cross, and so forth.)

The Archons repay celebrities for their service as vortices in the Loosh matrix by providing them with temporal rewards like wealth and power and enticing sex partners. *(I see Conye's matte black Porsche, a sleek corporate conference table surrounded by Anubis-headed guys in Armani suits, a bound and ball-gagged Newt Gingrich on his knees being sodomized by a lobbyist, and women—lots of famous, sexy women—including Beyoncé and Limn Lardassian.)* By ramping up the rewards to the False Self, the Archons strengthen the attachments of the celebrity's mortal soul to this world—thereby clipping his or her spiritual wings. In an almost literal sense, celebrities become vampires, stealing the Loosh of others to maintain their own darkly glamorous lifestyles. *(You can probably guess what kind of imagery goes along with that last part....)*

And how do we fight that Loosh thievery while it's happening to us? With light and love—or so I'm told. *Hit him with all the positive energy you have...* an inner voice tells me. I'm visually instructed in a kind of spiritual *ju-jitsu*, shown how I can

lean into Conye and use his swirling negative energy to spin the Divine Spark of my own positive energy, pinwheel-like, into an equally strong tornado of white light fetched down from my immortal soul. As I do so, I feel (*and see*) the white light of love expanding from within my solar plexus and radiating outward to my arms and legs. My strength returns along with it.

When the light gets to my hands, they throb and send twin pulses of white light into Conye's face. He pitches backward, temporarily blinded, and shrinks to his normal size. I've broken his hold on me, but the effort has cost me. I don't have the strength to go a second round. I stagger out of the tunnel, looking for a safe place to hide.

Up ahead, I see a luminous coyote. He's standing on top of a large gray rock, surrounded by a golden glow. *The Coyote will protect me*, I think, not realizing that it's a lamp-lit bronze statue of Balto—the heroic Siberian husky that led a team of sled dogs over six hundred miles through arctic blizzards to deliver the diphtheria antitoxin that saved the citizens of Nome from an epidemic during the winter of 1925.

It makes no sense, but I keep telling myself that if I can just make it to the Coyote, I'll be safe. I'm so tired. I can feel the gin turning to poison in my system. I still don't know the name of the havoc-wreaking entheogen in Conye's blunt, but whatever it was, I'm coming down from it now, hard and fast. It's all I can do to put one foot in front of the other.

Climbing the rock feels like climbing Mount Everest. When I finally get to the top, I curl up as close as I can to the big dog. I wrap my arms around his immobile hind legs and rest my cheek on the smooth bronze mound directly beneath his noble canine dick. I know I'm leaving myself exposed to the elements—and to a possibly vengeful Conye Best—but my body is simply too exhausted to care.

The Coyote will take care of me.

When I close my eyes, I experience a few seconds of whirling darkness and then I pass out.

THAI LADY VANISHES

In a dream I'm unaware of dreaming, I see the Creature from the Black Lagoon crawling from the waves on Moonstone Beach. He staggers through the surf wearing a Batman utility belt and blue satin underpants that sag at the crotch, dripping a steady stream of green seawater. He knows he looks ridiculous. He wants to be a superhero (*"Call me Glaucus, the greenish sea-god!"*), but to most people, he's just a scary jerk.

On the beach ahead of him, the carousel from Bryant Park has been heaved up on the shore like a shipwreck. The green-and-tan striped tent canopy is in flames, its Art Nouveau butterflies melting. Painted horses, hares, and a single green frog whip past in a wash of violent colors as the carousel spins at an impossible speed. The Creature is intent on riding one of those horses. With an awkward running leap, he snags a golden pole. The carousel's momentum lifts him off his finned feet. His body goes horizontal. He gets flung around the carousel's outer perimeter once, twice. Then his webbed fingers lose their grip and he lets out a plaintive, pathetic croak as he goes tumbling into the dunes.

The Creature from the Black Lagoon is undeterred. He gets up, slapping sand from the crotch of his Batman underpants. He takes another floppy-footed leap at the carousel and gets the same result: pole snag, lift-off, dizzying airborne terror, and then

a Wile E. Coyote tumble through a cartoonish cloud of dune dust. But he keeps trying, over and over. At a certain point, I realize the Creature from the Black Lagoon is me: *I want to ride the carousel. I keep getting thrown off.*

With that realization, the carousel slows. Its revolutions become erotic, voluptuous. I see all my ex-girlfriends riding topless on the painted horses, like female centaurs. While I watch them, languidly pumping up and down, their lovely full breasts set off a depth charge in my loins that extends the stretchy fabric of my Batman underpants to its outer limits.

I glimpse Pam riding a magnificent white stallion among my ex-girlfriends. She waves to me in passing. She mouths *I love you*. Then she whispers: "*What they'll say about me isn't true.*" I hear her voice echoing in my ears, repeating that phrase, over and over. I try to run to her, but my movements have slowed with the carousel. It's like trying to run up a down escalator. I don't know if I'll ever get there.

I intuit that the stallion Pam rides is our destiny, our good fortune—our entire future together. Only misery awaits me if I can't ride it with her. I run and run and run, but the stallion stays just out of reach. With a wild, all-or-nothing leap, I hurl myself at the carousel's wooden platform. I flop onto it belly-first, like a fish out of water. *Success!* I think as I get up on my hands and knees.

Then I feel a terrible stabbing pain in my sphincter as the stallion commences to screw me.



I realize I'm not in my own bed when I wake with a start and almost poke my eye out on Balto's bronze dick.

Groaning, with a hand held to my throbbing cornea, I scoot out from under Balto and sit up to look at my surroundings with the one good eye I have left. The first thing I see is a crowd of women gathered in front of the gray rock I've climbed up on.

Most of them are wearing fashionable tracksuits or yoga clothes from Lululemon. Early morning joggers, no doubt—although I also see a few baby strollers, so some of them must be affluent stay-at-home moms out for a stroll. The smell of Gore-Tex and spare Pampers hangs heavy in the air.

Most of the women are projecting looks of anger or disdain. I'm beginning to understand why. My pants are down around my ankles, for one thing. For another, Crash is just now waking up in his clothes on a bench directly behind them, looking in my direction while trying to suppress his laughter. My eyes follow his line of sight to the large bronze plaque embedded in the rock beneath Balto's front paws. A long, spattery streak of diarrhea runs down the center of it. I'm assuming Balto didn't have any cause to do that. It must be my own.

"That's so gross!" one of the women says, adjusting her sporty visor as if it will help focus the grimace of revulsion on her gaunt, sun-wrinkled face. If she wants me to feel ashamed, I'm already there. I pull up my boxers as modestly as I can while remaining seated. Then I woozily get to my feet and yank up my jeans.

"I hope you plan on washing that off," another woman says, crossing her arms beneath her sports-bra-flattened breasts. Her running shoes are an eye-catching combo of teal, chartreuse, and neon persimmon.

I resist the defensive impulse to say, "I'm not sure what's more aesthetically offensive, my shit or your shoes."

A tiny hand emerges, pointing, from one of the strollers. "*Poo-poo!*" a voice burbles from within.

You got that right, kid... I think to myself.

I have a vague recollection of waking in the dead of night with a hot, throbbing, horse-violated bunghole that was desperately trying to hold back a steaming volcano of gin-and-jizz-roiled poop. I remember dropping my pants, gripping Balto's ears, and crouching as the torrent of shit flew out of me. Then I went back to sleep. Had it only been a feverish dream?

Apparently not.

“You’re disgusting...” says a flabby Irish-looking woman with a large-pored scalp showing through her sparse, tightly permed red hair. She has fat blue spider veins webbing her temples and a muffin top midriff bulging out above overtaxed white yoga pants that do little to conceal the zebra-striped thong within. If she has a husband, I pity the poor bastard.

“Only a degenerate would crap on Balto,” she concludes.

“I just hit the plaque,” I say in my defense.

“He saved the stricken children of Nome,” another woman says with tremulous piety. “Now we can barely even read that.”

“I’m sorry. I had a really bad case of food poisoning,” I lie. “If someone ever offers you a plate of fried sea centipedes in a Basque restaurant and says, ‘Try the spines—they taste just like peppermint candy...’ you might want to pass on that.”

“I think I went to that restaurant,” says one of the more sympathetic women. “Did they have a stuffed alligator hanging from the ceiling wearing a purple wizard’s hat with a Corona bottle coming out of its ‘you-know-what’?”

“No. That sounds like a different restaurant—most likely Mexican. They’re a bawdy race.”

“Derek, we should get going...” Crash says to me from behind the crowd of indignant ladies.

I climb down from the rock. “Where’s Pam?” I ask him.

“I sent her home with Conye. He said he’d catch a cab and drop her off at my apartment. She has my keys.”

“How could you do that?” I ask Crash, upset that he’d entrust Pam to my rap-spitting archenemy. “Didn’t you see him blowing shit up with his eyeballs last night? He had laser beams coming out of there!”

“Conye’s fine,” Crash says, trying to calm me down. “He didn’t have lasers shooting out of his eyes when *I* saw him. You guys were both just really stoned.”

“Are you talking about Conye Best?” the woman with the hideous shoes asks us.

We ignore her and start walking toward the zoo.

“Hey!” she yells after us. “You can’t just leave this! Not cool!”

I turn around while continuing to walk backward. “We’re gonna get a bucket of water from the sea lion tank. We’ll be right back,” I tell her. I have a horrendous case of cottonmouth, but it’s not stopping me from lying to uptight jogger ladies on this frigid morning.

“I can’t believe you let Pam go off by herself with that ego-tripping hip-hop Jim Morrison!” I hiss at Crash once we’re out of jogger earshot. “Why didn’t you go with her?”

“Hey, someone had to stay and look out for you. I tried prying you off that statue, but you were passed out cold with your arms wrapped around Balto’s legs. You wouldn’t budge. I was afraid that if I just left you there, you’d get mugged—or something even worse might happen.”

“Like getting butt-raped by one of those horses that drag the carriages through Central Park?” I say, half-recalling my dream. It probably comes off as a non sequitur to Crash, but it makes perfect sense to me. “Well, thanks for looking out for me. I just wish Pam hadn’t gone off alone with Conye.”

“It was getting cold.” Crash doesn’t have to remind me. It’s still cold. I’m on the verge of shivering. “You didn’t want her sleeping out there with me, did you? Besides, I’m pretty sure Pam can take care of herself. And Conye’s way too famous to try anything with her, anyway.”

“You don’t know that...” I point out. “Just because he’s famous doesn’t mean jack. Remember O.J.?”

“Who could forget O.J.?”

“Robert Blake? Phil Spector? Pee-Wee Herman?”

“Pee-Wee killed a guy?”

“No, but he masturbated in public. I’m just sayin’....”

"He was *allegedly* caught jerking off in a Florida porn theater. That's hardly a major felony—but I get your point. Still, I think we can trust Conye. He seems like a cool guy."

"You didn't see him melt the face off that statue."

"No. And you didn't either, I should point out."

We've finally arrived at last night's intended destination: the Central Park Zoo. The sea lion tank is within easy viewing distance from the low brick-and-wrought-iron fence out in front—a fence I could have easily jumped. Several fat sea lions are basking on the island of rocks in the tank's center. One of them barks at us in a half-hearted way, somewhere in the sonic range between a belch and a groan.

"Still feel like going for a swim?" Crash asks me.

The idea doesn't seem so compelling in the light of day. "Maybe next time I'm stoned out of my mind with Conye Best," I say, knowing that day will likely never come.

"C'mon, I thought sea lions were your buds!"

"I've donated money to them," I say, recalling the hefty sum I contributed to the Morro Bay Aquarium so Pam and I could videotape Manny, Moe, and Jack for the day. "Sea lion pups are having a hard time out in California. You probably didn't know that."

"I've heard the drought is crashing the whole ecosystem out there. So I guess I shouldn't be surprised that sea lions are taking a hit, too."

"Global warming is a bitch."

"One more example of Huxley's hell," says Crash. "But right now I'm actually cold. So let's get a taxi, okay?"

We head past a gift shop and up some stairs to Fifth Avenue, where we flag down a taxi to take us back to Crash's apartment.

The Muslim cabdriver is listening to some trippy Bollywood pop music, zills swirling and female voices ululating hypnotically from a cheap plastic boom box on the front seat. It lends a surreal quality to our trip back down Fifth Avenue, past all the

luxury goods stores: *Apple, Tiffany, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Ralph Lauren*.... It reminds me of President Bush's edict that Americans should go shopping to preserve their nation's values in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—in effect, making “Shop ‘til you drop!” our troops' rallying cry as they invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. A three-trillion-dollar boondoggle with more than a million lives lost—and for what? So ExxonMobil and Halliburton could keep their profit margins up?

(And wasn't it interesting how Afghan opium production shifted into overdrive with the influx of American troops... *Was the CIA up to its old Air America / Golden Triangle tricks again?* I wonder to myself.)

When we get upstairs to Crash's apartment, Trout yips at us from behind the front door before we even knock, but Pam isn't there to let us in. We have to ride the elevator back down to the lobby so Crash can get an extra key from the doorman.

“Maybe she went out for breakfast,” Crash suggests.

I don't think that's even remotely plausible. “Pam's more considerate than that,” I tell him. “She would've called and asked if we wanted anything. Or at least left a note on the front door.”

I call Pam's number on my iPhone. It rings several rings and finally goes to her voice mail. I leave a message, asking her to call me back. Then I try calling again. Same result.

When we get the front door open, Trout leaps straight into my arms, wriggling and shivering like the fish he's named after. He's way too excited. He's acting like he's been left alone in a strange place all night.

This is not fucking good... I think to myself. I get Trout's leash and clip it to his collar. If he's been alone since we left for dinner last night, the first thing he's going to need is a walk.

“Check around and see if Pam left any signs of being here,” I say to my brother on the way out. “I'll look for her around the park while I'm walking Trout.”

I'm feeling sick in the pit of my stomach—and not just because of my hangover. I'm really worried that something's

happened to Pam. I don't want to believe it, but I can't help thinking that Conye might have seduced her.

Or kidnapped her.

As soon as we get out to the curb, Trout hunches over and waddles forward on his hind legs with his tail sticking straight out. A big, goopy pile of diarrhea squirts out of him like soft serve ice cream.

"I know just how you feel, buddy..." I say, sympathizing. I put a blue plastic dog bag over my hand and scoop up as much of the ochre mess as I can from the gutter. It's a smelly business, reversing the bag and tying it up, but I've done it so many times before that I barely notice the stench, even in my hypersensitive, hungover state. The human body is an unpleasantness-discounting machine; it can get used to almost anything.

Poor Trout. I try to imagine his anxiety, left alone in a stranger's apartment all night with no knowledge of where his human companions have gone off to and when—or *if*—they'll be coming back. At times like that, it must really suck to be a dog. Trout didn't deserve that. I feel guilty. This is the second time Trout has suffered because of my lack of self-control. I should just stop drinking and getting high altogether. None of this would have happened if I'd stayed sober.

I walk Trout across the street to Bryant Park, looking for a garbage can. I find one and toss in the poop-weighted blue bag. Then we walk over to *Le Carrousel*—the carousel from my pre-diarrhea dream—silent at this early morning hour, looking quaint and very still among the budding green trees. I try to find the painted stallion that fucked me, but he's not there.

No sign of Pam, either.

I crouch down and give Trout a hug. "I'm so sorry you got left alone last night," I tell him, petting his broad furry back. I can't say for sure that Trout understands me, but he gives me a long, sincere look with his two different-colored eyes. Then he licks the side of my cheek. Apology accepted, as always.

“We need to find your mom,” I tell him. “Can you smell her anywhere?”

When I stand up, Trout aims his snout at the sidewalk and starts sniffing. He leads me to the edge of the carousel and paws at the ground, whining a little, but I don’t see anything. Then he reverses direction and heads toward the library, tugging hard on his leash, as if he knows where he wants to go. If Pam was here last night, her scent might still be fresh. I’m not a dog, so I don’t know how that stuff works.

Trout leads me around the corner and tries to break into a run—paws scrabbling on the sidewalk, paying no heed to the collar choking his throat as I try to get him to slow down. Finally, I give up and run alongside him, hoping we can avoid crashing into anyone on the sidewalk.

When we get to the marble lions—Patience and Fortitude—Trout stops and looks around. He seems confused. He sits down on his rump and refuses to budge. He looks all around again and lets out a low whimper.

Apparently, he thought Pam would be there to greet us, but she’s nowhere to be found.

I decide to stand there with Trout for a while. I try calling Pam’s number again. She doesn’t pick up. It goes straight to voice mail this time. *Does that mean she’s turned off her phone? Or maybe she’s on a call to someone else.* Either way, it gives me hope. I take it to mean that Pam still has access to her phone—and she’ll call or send a text in a few minutes.

We wait. I check my email accounts from my iPhone. Nothing but the usual spam: bogus offers for Glamazon Rewards, news about an Ancient Energy Medicine Used By Celebrities (*Yeah, Loosh...* I think to myself), a phishing scam from a fake Elon Musk touting a Tesla Engine That Works On Thin Air, a likely NSA front calling itself TrackR Bravo (“Never Lose Your Wallet, Keys, Or Really Anything Again”).

Too bad Pam doesn’t have an RFID tracking chip imbedded in her neck, I think to myself, heavy on the internal irony.

Scrolling down, I find some new Twitter followers, some old friends updating their Facebook status, some weird doctor in New Jersey being forced out of his practice after he discovered a billion-dollar secret for hair restoration that he wasn't supposed to know about, and so on... 114 messages in all, none of them from my girlfriend—although I'm told that "Attractive Russian Girls Are Waiting For You!"

Sure, to lead me on and loot my bank accounts.... Goddamit, where's Pam?

We head back to Crash's apartment. Trout doesn't go willingly, but he doesn't fight it much, either. He seems to know that Pam won't be showing up. I'm not sure which one of us is more devastated, but it's obvious that she's the primary source of love, light, and everything good for both of us.

Before we go back inside, Trout pauses to pee on a lamppost, leaving his scent signature for other New York dogs to ponder. Maybe it's his version of dog email: *Lost! Thai Lady Owner. Gorgeous black hair. Very friendly. Answers to Pam From Siam. If found, please urinate on steps of 32 West 40th Street, Bryant Park Place, with further info.*

Okay, so maybe not.

Trout and I say hello again to the smiling doorman who looks like Barack Obama's cousin and then we get in the elevator to go back up to the eleventh floor.

"Did you find anything?" I ask Crash as we walk in the door.

"Nothing. She wasn't here last night," he says.

But I already knew that.

"Do you think we should call the police?" I ask him.

"She hasn't been missing long enough yet. They won't do anything." Crash sounds as if he has a long history of dealing with the N.Y.P.D.—either that, or he's watched a lot of episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

"Can we ask the doormen if they saw her, at least?"

"I already did that. They called and woke up the night clerk at home. He says he didn't see her—and he swears he would've remembered."

"What about Conye?"

"Do you have his number?"

"No. Do you?"

"I didn't even think to ask him for it."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No, but I can find out. I'll bet G.E. knows."

"G.E. Smith? That guitar player you were telling us about?"

"Yeah. Let me put in a call to Laylon. She'll call his wife, and if Taylor doesn't know where Conye lives, G.E. will—I'm almost sure. He knows everybody."

For Crash, "everybody" seems to be a shorthand way of saying "everybody who's rich, famous, and/or influential in the music industry." In other words, the "somebodies"—not the nobodies like me.

Crash gets on the phone to his art dealer. After the usual pleasantries, he tells her he needs to track down Conye Best, explaining how they met last night, and now Pam's missing, and so on. It's a very forthright conversation. I'm impressed by how much trust my brother seems to place in Laylon. If it had been up to me, I think I would have lied about the details a little, to make the situation seem less embarrassing for everyone.

"Okay, Laylon's talking to Taylor. She'll call us back," Crash says after he hangs up. "Now all we can do is wait."

I feed Trout his breakfast and give him a bowl of fresh water. Crash goes downstairs to get some scones and hot coffee from a place called Zeytin Fine Food Market Place next door. While he's away, I try calling Pam's phone one more time. It goes straight to voicemail. I don't leave a message. But I text her (Please call me. It's urgent.) to make sure all the bases are covered.

I hate this. New York City is a really bad place to lose your girlfriend. Over eight million people to sift through, but none of them are my friends, except my brother—

—and Pam, wherever she is....

By the time Crash gets back to the apartment, he's already spoken to Laylon on his iPhone again. G.E. has given her Conye's address. It's on Houston Street, in SoHo. Crash explains how I can get there by subway. He thinks it's best if he stays behind, in case Pam shows up at his apartment.

I don't like the idea of meeting up with Conye again so soon after The Night of the Demonic Laser Eyeballs, but he was the last person to see Pam before she disappeared. If he doesn't have any clues about where she might have gone to, I don't know where I'll look for her next.

As I exit the apartment, I make a silent vow to do absolutely anything to get Pam back. There will be no rest for me until I find her. I'll follow every lead, do whatever's necessary... I'll even risk another encounter with Conye's Celebrity Hand of Death.

A VISIT TO LIMNYE

According to the latest Oogle Search counts, Oogle was used to search for Jesus about five million times in the last year. During that same time period, searches for Limn Lardassian hit almost fifty million. The Original Messiah has around five million followers on Facebook. The irrepressible Limn L. has over twenty-six million followers on Facebook, thirty-three million followers on Twitter, and thirty-seven million followers on Instagram. (Of course, Christ doesn't post anywhere near so many sexually provocative selfies as Limn, so he has that going against him.... *More dick pics, Jesus!*)

There's no way of knowing if the Beatles were really "more popular than Jesus"—as John Lennon got slammed in the press for saying back in 1966—but a case could be made that Limnye (as the dynamic duo of Limn Lardassian and Conye Best is known in the tabloid press) would beat the hell out of Jesus in any 2015 social media popularity contest.

Beezos Beats Jesus! the headlines might read. Or: *Limnye Crushes Lamb of God.*

That's what I'm thinking about while I walk to the corner of West 40th and Sixth to catch the D train downtown. I'm supposed to get off at the Broadway-Lafayette station stop in SoHo and then walk two blocks west, according to Crash.

I find a ticket booth and buy a weeklong Metro pass, figuring I'll need it in my search for Pam. The subway's white tile walls are lined with a variety of predominantly black posters for the UTube Music Awards. They feature laser light show halos shooting out from behind the Photoshopped faces of people I've never heard of: FKA Twigs, Charli XCX, Martin Garrix, etc.

I must be getting old... I think to myself, but hey, at least I've gotten high with Conye Best and survived an encounter with his laser-shooting eyeballs. Not everyone can say that.

Riding the D train is like being locked in the back of a police van with a bunch of convicts on their way to prison. All the people look so wrung out and sad. No one wants to make eye contact. Most of them are staring at their phones. I try to imagine the daily drudgery that makes them seem so cowed: cruddy jobs, hateful spouses, lack of money, health problems, broken family ties... all the things that can suck the joy out of life. I wonder if New Yorkers are generally more depressed than other people in the world, or if they just appear that way while riding a beat-to-hell subway train to work in the morning.

When I get back aboveground in the crisp morning air, I'm all turned around. I end up going the wrong way on Houston—east, instead of west toward Conye's apartment. I pause for a moment in front of a BP gas station with a giant billboard on the wall behind it that displays an athletic-looking bearded guy launched from a trampoline, his back arched in mid-flight across a wide blue sky, on the verge of dunking a football through a basketball hoop mounted on a tall pole attached to an all-terrain vehicle. It's a UTube ad for Dude Perfect, an amiable team of five Texas A&M jocks who perform clever, seemingly impossible sports stunts on video. Pam told me about them once, when she was talking about her competition. The legend at the bottom of the billboard displays a tally of Dude Perfect's fans: +4,493,002 at the time the billboard went up.

Those Dude Perfect dudes make my sweet Pam From Siam look like a slacker. In terms of popularity, they're running neck-

and-neck with Jesus—but still nowhere near the stratospheric numbers put up by Limn and Conye.

I walk a little farther, but I'm still not seeing the right building numbers, so I go back the way I came. Once I cross Broadway, I know I'm on the right track. I find Conye's address on a modern-looking six-story redbrick building with sludgy juniper green trim. It occupies the entire south side of Houston between Greene and Mercer. I decide to do some reconnaissance before I venture inside.

Right around the corner, on Mercer, I find a funky Marc Jacobs store and a much more elegant storefront with fluted gray columns framing plate glass display windows for Versace. Farther down: Vera Wang, Versani, Balenciaga—and then Prada and The Mercer Kitchen at the end of the block. Taking a right on Prince Street and coming up Greene on the other side, I see an Apple Store on the corner and a Ralph Lauren directly across the street. Then a Warby Parker, a Hugo Boss, a Brunello Cucinelli, a Dior Homme, and a Paul Smith.

Definitely Limn and Conye territory.

When I get back to the sludgy green lobby doors of Conye's apartment building, I take a deep breath and step inside. I can't shake the feeling that I don't belong there—that I'm a trespasser. I know I'll probably come off as a stalker when I tell the doorman that I'm there to see Conye. And that's exactly what happens.

The doorman looks like Mike Tyson, minus the facial tattoo. He's the sort of guy you'd expect to find working as a bouncer in a nightclub where people get stabbed and shot on a regular basis. He appears to take his job of looking after the building's tenants very, very seriously.

I approach the front desk meekly, as if I'm trailing dog shit. The doorman squints at me from beneath his heavy brow ridge. "Can I help you?" he asks, giving me the exact opposite impression of someone who wants to be helpful.

“Um, yeah...” I say with tiptoeing trepidation, “I’m here to see Conye Best.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but I was hanging out with him last night. I just need to talk to him.”

“Fans and paparazzi wait outside. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

“I’m not a fan,” I try to explain. “I mean, well, *I am*, but that’s not why I need to see him. I’m looking for my girlfriend. If you’ll just call him up and tell him that Derek’s here looking for Pam, he’ll know what it’s about.”

“Look, man, there’s no way Conye’s up there bangin’ your girl. Limn’s in there with him.”

“I’m not accusing him of stealing my girlfriend. I just can’t find her and Conye was the last person to see her. C’mon, just give him a call. He’ll know who I am.”

“He doesn’t like being bothered this early in the morning.”

“I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t think it was crucial.”

“Mister Best has been known to lose his temper,” the doorman warns me.

“Believe me, I know. Can you just call him?”

“If you’re not being straight with me, I’ll throw you out on your skinny little ass. It might hurt. Do you understand that?”

“I understand. Just make the call. I’m telling you the truth.”

Reluctantly, the doorman picks up the desk phone and puts it to his ear. He punches in some unseen numbers. Then, after a few moments, he says in a cordial tone: “I’m sorry to bother you, ma’am, but there’s a gentleman at the front desk who says he needs to speak to Mister Best. His name is—”

He shoots me a hostile look. I tell him: “Derek Swannson.”

“Derek Swannson. He says he was out with Mister Best last night and now he’s looking for his lady friend.” The doorman listens for a while and then nods his head. He says: “All right, I’ll send him up.”

After he hangs up the phone, the doorman says to me in a sulky tone: “Take the elevator to the sixth floor. Limn will meet you at the elevator. Conye’s asleep right now, but she says he told her about you when he got home last night.”

“Okay, thanks...” I say, glad I’ve dodged the physical harm that might have come my way if Conye had failed to mention me. I head to the elevator thinking: *Holy crap! I’m about to meet Limn Lardassian. I wonder if that means I’ll be on reality TV?*

On the way up, I continually remind myself: *Don’t stare at her tits... do not be an asshole and stare at her tits, like Conye did with Pam... you know you’ll want to, but no matter how much cleavage Limn is showing, resist the urge to stare at her tits. Look her into the eyes, instead.*

And don’t check out her ass, either.

When the elevator doors open, there she is, possibly the most famous woman in the world: Limn Lardassian in the fleshy flesh. She’s wearing skin-tight black lingerie under a floor-length ivory satin dressing gown that clings to her every curve. When I step out of the elevator to shake her hand, all I can think is:

She’s so damn pretty!

Sure, she’s a little thick through the middle (I remind myself that she’s pregnant again), but that face—that perfectly symmetrical Estonian-American face, known to almost everyone on the planet with an Internet connection—well, it’s even more gorgeous in person. And not only that... there’s a vibe coming off her that surprises me, but it’s unmistakable: Limn Lardassian is a genuinely nice person. She’s not the shallow, solipsistic diva I’d been expecting. She’s practically glowing with unfaked empathy and humble, human warmth.

“Derek...” she says with a sly smile, “my husband told me about his big adventure with you last night. I’m so glad you didn’t actually make it to the zoo.”

“He told you about that, huh?”

She pulls me into a hug. “We stayed up laughing for hours after he got home.” The hug is brief, but it’s one of the best I’ve ever had. Only Pam hugs better.

“Conye made it sound like he had a really great time with you guys,” Limn continues. “The way he described it was so funny, I wasn’t even mad that he got stoned.”

“I wish you could’ve been there with us,” I say, meaning it.

“Me too, but I had a book signing and some TV stuff to do with my sisters. Conye doesn’t like being on the show, so he went off to do his own thing. I think he needed to blow off some steam, anyway, so it was perfect that he ran into you and Pam... but she’s missing now?”

“Yeah, she didn’t make it back to my brother’s apartment last night. I was hoping Conye might know where she went.”

“He said he dropped her off in front of the library. That’s where your brother lives, right?”

“It is... right around the corner. But she didn’t make it home.”

“Oh no! Have you talked to the police?”

“I guess that’s next. I was hoping Conye might have a clue about where she took off to—something she might’ve said to him, maybe.”

“I don’t know... let’s go wake him up and find out.”

She leads me down the hall to the door of their apartment. Through no fault of my own, I’m offered an up close and personal view of Limn’s famous booty as she walks ahead of me (*35 Pounds of Butt Filler!* according to *VanityWeek* magazine, but I don’t want to believe that). It’s big and shapely—like a Venus of Willendorf sculpture come to life—but I find myself preferring Pam’s smaller, peach-shaped posterior. Maybe it’s a cultural thing.

Or maybe I just really miss my girlfriend.

Before she opens the door, Limn turns to me with her big, doe-like eyes and says, “I like Pam. I really hope you find her.”

“Have you two already met?” I ask her, suddenly confused.

“No, but Conye makes me watch all her videos. He thinks they’ll make me smarter. But I’m already a lot smarter than most people realize.” Then she turns the doorknob and invites me in.

Conye’s former bachelor pad (now Limnye’s shared love-nest) looks like a museum space, or a hip art gallery installation. The only real decoration I see is a burnt-looking stone sculpture of an armless Cupid with singed wings mounted on a tall white pedestal. Other than that, the materials dominate: everything is made of French limestone or pear wood honed into simple, essential forms. It’s all arranged in an open, uncluttered floor plan designed by the trendy Italian minimalist architect, Claudio Silvestrin.

When I’d mentioned my career as an architect over drinks at Salon de Ning with Conye, he’d told me about his apartment’s gut-renovation, name-dropping Silvestrin as if I should already know everything about him. (I had to look him up on Wikipedia while I was using the restroom about twenty minutes later.) I was told the job had cost some major music bucks—which, in my mind, equates to the adult-version of Monopoly money when compared to the hard-earned dollars that most people make from ordinary wages or salaries. “But it was worth it,” Conye said. “Totally fucking worth it.”

I have to admit it’s a beautiful place, but I don’t think I’d ever want to live there. It feels too cold for my tastes. I’d be afraid of slipping on the slick floor and banging my head on the rough-hewn limestone slab (nearly as big as a queen-sized mattress) that serves as a coffee table in the center of the room. There’s no question, though, that Limnye’s SoHo apartment makes my little Mid-Century Modern shitbox in Morro Bay look like a whoopee cushion purchased at Ruby Montana’s Vintage Knick-Knacks Emporium. I’d be embarrassed to have Limn and Conye over for dinner.

Not that that’ll ever happen.

“Conye! We have a visitor!” Limn shouts toward the back bedroom.

I hear a groan and a “What the....” A few minutes later, Conye pads out into the main living area in bare feet, rubbing and scratching at his fade like lice have been gnawing on it overnight. He looks at me and doesn’t seem the least bit surprised.

“I see you’re still wearing your Turnbull & Asser pajamas. Rough night?” I ask with friendly sarcasm.

“Fresh set,” he yawns. “Whaddup, D?”

“Pam never made it home last night.”

“Conye, your pants are sticking out,” Limn observes.

Conye looks down at his crotch, unconcerned. It’s like he has a grown man’s forearm under there, tenting his pajama bottoms.

Beezos!

“Mornin’ wood, baby,” says Conye. “You know I can’t help it.”

“True,” says Limn, “but we have a guest.”

“Derek? He’s seen nastier shit on Fifth Avenue. Homeless nigga whipped it out the other day and made Ray J’s dick look like a baby’s dried-up umbilical cord. His brother has the video, if you want proof.”

“Let’s leave that one up to my imagination,” Limn says wisely.

Conye shifts his attention back to me. “Now, what’s this shit about Pam?” he asks, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to be having a conversation while sporting a massive hard-on.

“I can’t find her,” I say. “I’m hoping you might know where she is. Did she say anything to you?”

“Just that she needed to walk the dog. I dropped her off in front of the library, like she asked me to. Then I came here.”

“You didn’t hang around to make sure she made it inside?”

“I told her we could have the taxi circle around and take her right to Crash’s door, but she said she didn’t mind the walk. She pointed out the building to me. It wasn’t far.”

“I know. It’s not.”

“But I should’ve insisted. I’m sorry, bro...” Conye says, sounding sincerely apologetic. “I hope she turns up.” He tries to give my shoulder a reassuring pat, but I flinch out of his reach as the quivering erection straining his PJs swings toward my thigh.

“You can’t think of anything she said that might be a clue to where she was going?” I ask him.

“She was going home—to your bro’s place—to walk the dog. Other than that, I got nothin’.”

“Shit. This sucks.”

“I know it,” Conye acknowledges. “I really like that girl of yours. I hope she’s okay. But now, if you don’t mind, Limn and I have a little business to take care of in the bedroom.”

“Again, Conye?” Limn jokingly complains.

“You know I need it at least five times a day,” Conye says, padding away on his bare feet.

“I’ll be there in a minute...” Limn calls after him. Then she turns to me. “Things are about to get weird for you. I can tell,” she says in a low, confidential tone.

“Weird how?” I ask her.

“Conye doesn’t make new friends unless they’re ready to go down the rabbit hole with him. So take my advice: don’t trust everything you see and hear from now on. There will always be ridiculous rumors, but Conye really loves me and I really love him. I know he would never cheat on me. Don’t forget that, okay? It’s important.”

I almost ask, “*Why should I care if you two are in love or not?*” But that would come off sounding rude, so I hold my tongue. Maybe Limn is more solipsistic than I’d thought.

She stands on her toes then, loops her arms around my neck, and gives me a surprisingly fierce hug as she whispers into my ear: “Pam’s all right. I know you’ll get her back.”

“I hope so,” I say as the famous Limn Lardassian kisses me on the cheek with those magnificent pouty lips of hers. It’s the softest, gentlest kiss—more mother to broken-hearted son than anything sexy. I take back any thoughts I had about her being solipsistic, or anything else I’ve ever thought about her that could be considered the tiniest bit mean.

Limn’s great. I can see why Conye loves her.

“You’re much nicer in person than I thought you’d be,” I admit to her.

“I love it when people underestimate me and then get pleasantly surprised,” she says as she walks me to the door. “I play into the perception of me, but it’s not really me. I’m sure Pam does the same thing sometimes—even though she might not want to.”

I’m not exactly sure what Limn means by that, but I have a hunch I’ll find out later.

As hunches go, it’s a good one.

THE DISSOCIATION WALTZ

I spend the rest of the morning at the NYPD's Midtown South precinct house on West 35th Street. It's a modern low-rise that's seen better days. The façade is all dark brown bricks, verging on black, stacked in vertical rows like prison bars between tall aluminum frame windows and ochre-tinted stucco. It must have seemed like a vision of the future when it was built back in 1969, but now it just looks tired and a bit childish (*"Gee, what can we build with blocks today?"* Big Bird asks the civic-minded kids on *Sesame Street*), like so much of the architecture from that era.

The interior design scheme sucks even harder. New York City must want its police officers to feel depressed and demoralized as they go about their daily business, because everything in there is sixties modern shabby: delaminating desktops and cabinets, ugly scuffed tiles, chalky blotched paint in pukey colors. Even the badge-shaped NYPD signage on the big reception desk in the lobby looks like it's been gnawed at the edges and pissed on by rats.

After I tell the tired-looking lady cop behind the reception desk that I need to file a missing persons report, I get paired off with an older guy who introduces himself as Detective Pucciarelli. He's a tall guy with fluffy silver hair and an equally

fluffy silver cop moustache. He's wearing a flashy gold wristwatch, pleated wool-blend slacks, and a periwinkle blue dress shirt that does little to hide his grossly distended potbelly. He strikes me as a guy who's very impressed with his own badass criminal-pursuing self and scornful of "civilians"—but that's just my first impression. I hope I'm wrong.

"Let's go fill out some paperwork," Detective Pucciarelli says, leading me down a short hallway to a dismal interviewing room with a battered gray table and two beige metal folding chairs. He spreads out a sheaf of questionnaires on the table and taps the sheets with a cheap ballpoint pen. "So—who're we looking for?" he asks as we both sit down.

I go through the whole story with him as we fill out the paperwork, but I leave out the most embarrassing details. (*Could I be locked up for crapping on Balto? I'm not sure, but I don't want to find out by telling Detective Pucciarelli about it.*) The detective explains that all the information I'm providing will end up in NamUs—the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System—but first it has to be vetted by the appropriate criminal justice agency. He asks if I can put him in touch with Pam's family. I explain that Pam's mother is dead and she never knew her father. She doesn't have any family. She just has me.

"That might not be good enough," Detective Pucciarelli tells me. "Especially if it's *you* she's running away from."

"Why would she be running away from me?" I ask him. That hadn't even occurred to me.

"You're tellin' me you got drunk and let your girlfriend go home with Conye Best—and now you're thinkin' she's been kidnapped?"

"I hope not, but yeah, that's how it looks."

"But not kidnapped by Conye?" The detective is smirking at me from behind his fluffy silver mustache.

"No, I already told you... I went over to Conye's place this morning and asked him about it. He said he dropped Pam off in

front of the library. She was going up to my brother's apartment to walk the dog, but she never got there."

Detective Pucciarelli sighs and shakes his head. "You got a picture of her?"

I take out my iPhone and show him my most recent photo of Pam—one from the series of shots that I took in front of the stone lion at the New York Public Library with Pam posing in her thin blue halter top and breathtakingly short white shorts. It's actually one of her better photos: her long black hair is artistically windblown and backlit, her smile is wide and genuine, and her lovely green Thai eyes are twinkling with light and love. I feel a deep, sad longing for her, just looking at it.

Detective Pucciarelli lets out a low, wolfish whistle. "You mind tellin' me how a guy like you snagged a girl like that?"

"Hey—"

"Are you rich?"

"Hardly," I say. Then, to bolster my flailing ego, I append: "My books are selling pretty well right now, though."

"So you're a writer?"

"Part-time. I'm also an architect. That's where I made most of my money, until recently."

"I could tell you some stories... I been thinkin' about writin' a book myself."

"Good luck with that," I say. "It seems like there are more people writing books than reading them these days."

The detective looks at me askance, telegraphing his opinion that I'm not important enough in his city to be playing the wiseass with him. "So, you're out on the West Coast..." he says, to emphasize my lack of consequence.

"Yeah. I live in a little town called Morro Bay, just down the coast from Pam's apartment in Cayucos."

"That explains it then."

"Explains what?"

“How you hooked up with this Asian-Pacific version of Pamela Anderson.” Detective Pucciarelli leans back in his chair and lays his hands across his enormous bloated belly as he prepares to demonstrate his Holmesian powers of deductive reasoning. “Big fish, little pond,” he says.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning there’s not so much competition out there in the small towns. You must’ve looked pretty good to her—artsy but employable.”

“There’s more to it than just that,” I say, feeling aggravated.

“Here in the big city, though,” Detective Pucciarelli continues, talking right over me, “a girl like that usually ends up with one of those buff, trust fund snots with an MBA in ‘How To Rip People Off’ from one of the Ivy Leagues and a daddy way up the chain at Goldman Sachs.”

“Pam’s never been attracted to that type,” I say, recalling our conversation about hedge fund managers that weren’t afraid of a little housework.

“Oh no? You don’t think a guy like Conye Best couldn’t turn her head? Now we’re talkin’ big fish, big pond.”

Big everything... I think to myself, flashing on Conye’s tent-poled pajama bottoms earlier that morning.

“You seem like a guy with a low tolerance for bullshit. So you want the truth from me, straight up?”

“Sure. Lay it on me,” I say.

“I think Conye’s got your girlfriend stashed away in a hotel room somewhere. Someplace fancy, like the Four Seasons. I bet he showed her the time of her life last night. And I bet he promised her there’d be a whole lot more excitement comin’ her way, if she’d just lay low for a while.”

“No way. Conye’s married.”

The detective raises his foxy silver eyebrows at me and says, “Like that ever stopped anybody.” He tosses down his pen on top of the missing persons documents we’ve been filling out. It

clatters across the table. “Sorry, chief, but I think you’re gonna find out your girl’s been dinin’ on champagne and caviar and gettin’ herself righteously fucked.”

“You have a cynical attitude toward women,” I tell him.

“Nope. Just a cynical attitude toward the Conye Bests of this world—and what they can get away with.”

“Are we about done here?” I ask, inwardly seething.

“Almost. I’ll give you a DNA kit on your way out. We’ll need some stray hairs from a comb she uses—and maybe her toothbrush—in case a body turns up that we need a match to. Other than that, I’ll just need a copy of that picture and a description of what your girlfriend was wearing on the night she got ‘abducted’ or whatever.”

“That’s what she was wearing—what she has on in the photo. It was taken the same day.”

“I rest my fuckin’ case.”



When I get back to Crash’s apartment I find him sitting in front of his computer monitors with Sun Ra’s “Interstellar Low-Ways” on the stereo. The volume is up kind of loud.

“I found Pam’s phone,” he says, without turning around to look at me. Trout sits next to him, panting hard, while Crash rubs the blissed-out dog’s furry neck with his free hand. His other hand is busy clicking away with the computer’s mouse. I peer over Crash’s shoulder and see an Apple iTunes window on one of the monitors with all of Pam’s phone data displayed.

“How’d you do that?” I ask him.

“A combo of high and low tech. Trout looked like he needed another walk after you left, so I took him out. He started acting all weird when we got near the carousel, pawing at the ground, whining—”

“He did that with me, too...” I interrupt.

“But you probably didn’t get down on your knees and look under the carousel platform, did you?”

I leap to the obvious conclusion: “Pam’s phone was there?”

“Yeah—but so far under that someone must’ve tossed it there deliberately. I had to use a long stick to get it out. The carousel guy helped me.”

“But how’d you get her phone data? She had all that stuff password-protected.” As I recall, Pam always had to punch in a number to use her phone. She didn’t trust Apple’s thumbprint scanning technology.

“That was the high tech part. Her battery was dead, but I charged it up and then had an Anonymous friend walk me through the steps to hacking her iPhone with something called a Universal Forensic Extraction Device. It wasn’t that hard, actually. A four-digit passcode got me into most of it.”

“What do you mean, ‘most of it’?”

“She was also carrying around some data that was encrypted. I’ve got a guy working on it now—someone I trust, who I’ve known for years—but he’s told me it’s serious, NSA-level stuff. It might take him a while to crack it.”

“You’re making it sound like Pam was a spy.”

“I doubt she’s a spy. Her encryption techniques are just more sophisticated than you’d expect from a Cal Arts girl. Of course, there’s always the possibility that the encrypted data was planted there via a back door. The NSA has a nasty habit of doing shit like that to people it wants to keep an eye on.”

“Why would the NSA care about Pam?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I don’t have a fucking clue—unless they want the latest *Pam From Siam* videos before they get released to the public. She always puts a little QuickTime video of her work-in-progress on her iPhone so she can check out how it plays in mobile format.”

“I saw that,” Crash says, clicking on a file of the Archons and Loosh video we’d been working on. A lo-res mobile version of it opens in QuickTime Player on his main monitor and starts doing its thing as Sun Ra segues into the woozy saxophone blues of David Bowie’s “Win” on the stereo.

“That’s just rough,” I say, reflexively anticipating criticism. “It’s nowhere near finished yet.”

“It’s good stuff,” Crash says. “It’d make a nice companion piece to the art installation I’ve been working on. Maybe I can talk Laylon into building an annex in her gallery for watching videos. It might get you and Pam some extra publicity from New York City art critics.”

“That’d be great,” I say as visions of art world fame flit through my head. I wouldn’t mind having a sprinkle of stardust from Crash’s charmed life—although I don’t want it without Pam.

“How was your visit with Conye?” he asks me.

“Wait—did Pam call anyone last night?” I’m still trying to get my head around all the implications of finding her iPhone.

“No calls in or out since you guys left the West Coast,” Crash says. “Nothing suspicious in her email, or anything else I can find, either—although there’s a nice picture of you petting a shark that she posted to Instagram a few days ago.”

Right. On the morning before we got on the plane, a fishing boat had chugged into Morro Bay harbor with a sixteen-foot great white shark lashed to its starboard side. After a cable winch hauled the dead shark up to the pier by its tail, people started crowding around to get their pictures taken with it. Pam and I had been drinking coffee and sharing a Maple Bacon doughnut on the back deck of Rosa’s Shark Shack—our new favorite morning hangout, thanks to Barb’s salty presence—and from our picnic bench perch we’d watched the whole scene play out across the water. After we paid for our meal, we walked over to get a few shots of our own on Pam’s iPhone. I patted the shark’s goblin-like snout and mimed getting a blowjob, thrusting my hips high into the multiple rows of bloody, razor-sharp teeth—

all the while worried that the dangling monster might twitch to life and take an embarrassing bite out of my crotch.

Juvenile behavior, I know... but it made Pam laugh—and that's what I live for.

The caption on the shark blowjob pic that Pam posted to her Instagram account read: "Fearless sex addict and my heroic beau, Derek Swannson. He's the key to my soon-to-be-released video about Archons and Loosh."

"Have you considered the possibility that someone didn't want Pam posting that Archons video?" Crash asks me.

Clomenhoof, I think instantly.

"I mean, it makes a certain amount of sense..." Crash continues to speculate. "Pam wouldn't have ditched her phone if all she wanted was some time alone to do some sightseeing. It's looking more and more like she was abducted. She could've been trying to call 911 when someone knocked the phone out of her hand and kicked it under the carousel."

"Shit," I say. "I just spent half the morning at the police station trying to convince a detective that she'd been kidnapped, but he kept telling me she'd probably just gone off with Conye to get laid in a hotel room somewhere."

"What'd Conye have to say about that?"

"He was home with Limn. He said he dropped Pam off in front of the library last night, just like she asked him to. She told him she had to walk Trout. There's no way she would've left Trout without walking him first."

"And that didn't happen. The night clerk would've seen her. So someone must've grabbed her," Crash concludes.

"Fuck!" I'm feeling helpless, pissed-off, and frustrated, all at once—but most of all, I'm worried that something terrible might be happening to Pam and I have no way of stopping it.

"I think you need to go back to that detective and tell him to get his head out of his ass," my big brother advises me. "The police have to start looking for her."

“I need to go back, anyway,” I say, showing him the cheap plastic DNA kit that Detective Pucciarelli gave me to take home. “I’m supposed to get a DNA sample from Pam’s hairbrush and take it back to him.”

“Take her phone with you, too. I’ve already downloaded everything I need from it. Tell the detective I’ll share the data with him if he can’t figure out how to hack into it on his own. Or no—*wait*—just give him the passcode. It’s 3699.”

“The last four digits of my phone number,” I say, suddenly feeling very sad.

“Yeah, I noticed...” Crash says. “Not the most unguessable string of numbers she could have come up with, but at least she was always thinking of you. It makes me think the encrypted data on her phone might belong to someone else—maybe whoever’s behind this. I hope we can crack it.”

“I hope so, too,” I say as I shuffle off on a melancholy search for Pam’s hairbrush.



Back at the NYPD’s Midtown South precinct, I spend another twenty minutes trying to convince Detective Pucciarelli that my girlfriend isn’t some random starfucking super-slut. He seems to give me more credence after I hand him Pam’s iPhone and provide him with the passcode. He says he’ll see to it that Pam’s NamUs data gets fast-tracked. He explains that he can’t issue an Amber Alert for her because she’s an adult with no physical or mental disabilities, but he’ll do everything else within his power to make sure she gets found.

I’ll just have to take his word on that. I can’t force him to do anything.

Meanwhile, Crash and his Anonymous hacker pals are busy tracing Clonenhoof’s web trail, trying to figure out his identity and whereabouts. I don’t want to be an impediment to that, so I decide to stay away from him for the rest of the afternoon.

Standing on the corner of West 35th and Ninth, I find that I have no idea where to go next—so I just start walking with no particular destination in mind. *Dérive* (or the “drift”) is what the French Letterists used to call that. The *dérive* helped them develop their theories about *psychogeography*, which they defined as the ‘specific effects of the geographical environment on the emotions and behavior of individuals.’ By moving through urban landscapes without a purpose—by letting the surrounding architecture and ‘attractions of the terrain’ subconsciously direct their travels—the Letterists believed the *dérive* would lead them to new and authentic experiences that could help them break free of the monotonous, soul-deadening daily routines that most people succumb to in late-stage capitalist societies.

I realize all that sounds like a fancy excuse for ditching work and wandering around the city like a bum, but that’s what the Letterists believed. I’m not making it up.

My first exposure to this artsy theory of bumming around came from my brother, of course. Crash is deep into Guy Debord, the radical Marxist theorist and de facto leader of the socialist-anarchist group Letterist International and the later, more famous, Situationist International. Debord was the guy who wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*, which has often been cited as the catalyst for the Paris Uprising of 1968. He defined the Spectacle as ‘a social relation between people that is mediated by images’ (mass media, advertising, pop culture, etc.), which supplants direct experience, resulting in increased alienation and social dysfunction—thereby making it a powerful system for social control.

If you follow Debord’s thinking, the most powerful weapon in the military-industrial-intelligence complex arsenal is the television—and now, by extension, computer screens.

It’s obvious—to me, at least—that Debord’s theories on art and class power have had a huge impact on my brother’s work. Crash’s latest installation-in-progress is called *The Dissociation Waltz*. He came up with that title because he sees Debord’s Spectacle escalating exponentially with the rise of social media

on the Internet, resulting in not just society-wide alienation, but also mass dissociation—the splintering of formerly integrated psyches into technologically cocooned alter personalities with little or no empathy and a willingness to act upon the subconsciously-implanted suggestions of their controllers—which was one of the long-term goals of the CIA’s MKULTRA program. That lack of empathy makes it easier for people to inflict emotional and physical violence on others, creating more dissociation in a downward spiral (which, in turn, makes it easier to implement the Deep State’s plans for the progressive militarization and political repression of domestic society).

Let’s not forget that most of what we’ve come to know as the Internet was invented at DARPA—the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency. It’s now being used for a vast and unprecedented experiment in culturally induced dissociative identity disorder that arrests the mental and spiritual development of the masses by turning them into self-deceiving slaves unaware of their own slavery. They’re so addicted to the online distractions of email, shopping, gaming, social media posturing, and jerking off to porn that they can’t even figure out what’s in their own best interests. Almost everyone is getting dumbed down to the mental state of a clueless fourteen year old.

In other words, Selfie Nation is well on the way toward becoming Dissociated Zombie Nation—if you can believe Crash. He thinks it’s happening because it’s the best way for the upper one-tenth of 1% of the population to control the other 99.9%. They might have all the money and political power, but the numbers are against them. The eighty people controlling over half the world’s wealth wouldn’t stand a chance if the rest of the world collectively decided to take those ill-gotten gains back. So their long con is to deploy the Spectacle to hypnotically program the masses into passivity, self-policing ideological conformity, and loving their enslavement.

I walk along the northern side of Penn Station and then wander over to West 32nd Street, heading east into Koreatown. I stop at a Caffebene to get a large iced Cafe Mocha to help me think along the way. I should probably be stopping somewhere

for lunch instead, but I'm so anxious and worried about Pam that I don't think I can eat.

A cheerful guy with asymmetrical black bangs shouts hello to me from behind the huge chrome La Marzocco espresso machine as I walk in. He's wearing orange pants, a blue paisley shirt with pearl-buttoned breast pockets, thick-rimmed two-tone glasses, and a pale grey tweed fedora. His jaunty enthusiasm is so contagious that he coaxes a thin smile out of me—my first of the entire, miserable day. A more demure woman at the cash register returns my smile as she takes my money. Her long auburn hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail and topped by a black Charlie Chaplin-style bowler hat with a rolled brim. In an instant, those two Korean baristas make me understand why my brother loves New York City so much. It's not just a cultural melting pot—it's a place where everyone can be themselves.

How do the lyrics from LCD Soundsystem's "North American Scum" go? Something like: *New York's the greatest if you get someone to pay the rent / It's the furthest you can live from the government.*

You got that right, James Murphy... I think to myself.

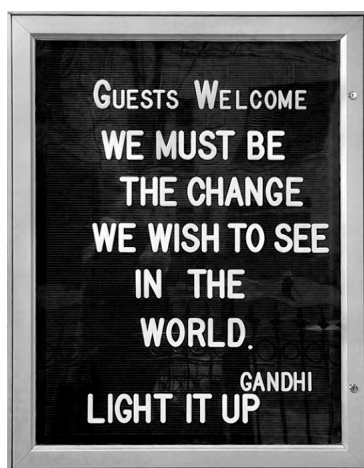
I take my iced Cafe Mocha and head back out into the street, where I find myself in a canyon of hi-rises with gaudy business signs on almost every floor: enticements for karaoke bars, bodywork spas, Internet cafes, discount plastic surgeons, laser skin clinics, Korean BBQ joints, and wireless phone stores. It's a concrete beehive of *ballyu*—the latest high-tech, high-speed iteration of Korean pop culture that's now a global phenomenon—a sort of "Gangnam Style" hypercapitalism that seems to be our future. South Korea is famous for being the world's most innovative country and for having the world's fastest Internet speeds. A greater percentage of its population uses smartphones than anywhere except for the United Arab Emirates. And what have those Arabs done for pop culture lately? Not much. So *ballyu* is kind of where we're all headed—which makes it disturbing to note that South Korea's suicide rate

has been the highest in the industrialized world for the last eight years straight.

Maybe my brother is onto something with his theory that the Internet is pushing us toward dissociation, which is so often seen in victims of severe trauma or torture. The nature of the Internet itself is totalitarian in its ubiquity and its limitless capacity for surveillance, social engineering, and predictive programming. Will the only meaningful choice for the human race come down to suicide or revolution?

I hope not—because in a Dissociated Zombie Nation revolution would prove impossible. Which is just how our technocratic overlords in the .1% want it.

I keep walking, heading one short block downtown along 5th Avenue, and then traversing three long blocks east along 31st until I get to Lexington. Along the way, I pass a four-story brick building that has an enclosed portico out in front with antique Chinese doors topped by a spiky, pagoda-style roof made of glazed Klein Blue terracotta barrel tiles. It's right next to the Sukyo Mahikari Center for Spiritual Development. Just to the left of the spiritual center's entrance, they have one of those glassed-in message boards with moveable white plastic letters against a furrowed black backboard, like you so often see in front of churches. The message behind the glass reads:



Okay, so I've seen that one before. Usually it gets me thinking that I should stop eating meat and be nicer to busboys and gas station attendants. But today it sparks some thoughts about the neocons.

My mind is flitting around so fast that putting those thoughts into a logical order is like trying to catch feathers on the wind, but here's the gist: Back in the late-1990s, neoconservatives associated with the ultra-right-wing think tank known as the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) came up with a foreign policy game plan they called *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. In it, they insisted that American troops should go kick some serious ass in Iraq and otherwise wreak havoc in the Middle East, but they lamented that it probably wouldn't happen soon enough for them without "some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor." This was back in the days prior to 9/11, prior to George W. Bush becoming President with a minority of the popular vote (thanks to his PNAC-affiliated brother Jeb's meddling down in Florida—with a big assist from five partisan and insanely hubristic Supreme Court justices). PNAC's founding statement was signed by just twenty-five people, ten of whom went on to serve in Bush's administration—sociopathic warmongers like Cheney, Rumsfeld, Libby, and Wolfowitz. So what I'm thinking is, *Maybe the neocons decided to pervert Gandhi's intended meaning and be the change they wished to see in the world. Maybe they became the terrorists so they could kick off a bogus preemptive War on Terror in the Middle East. Maybe they orchestrated the 9/11 attacks, or at least (with covert foreknowledge) got out of the way and let the attacks happen, so they could use that "new Pearl Harbor" to enact their imperialist agenda.*

It's a thought I've had many times before, but until now I've never associated it with Gandhi's famous saying. *Be the change...* what an empowering message for the sociopaths of this world. Were the neocons so swayed by a kind of Dr. Strangelove logic that they were willing to sacrifice the lives of 3,000 Americans—most of them New Yorkers—just to get the chance to invade Afghanistan and Iraq? Whenever I saw sneering Dick Cheney or

obfuscating Donald Rumsfeld on television, it seemed entirely plausible. A declaration of war, after all, is always a conscious decision to kill soldiers and civilians on both sides of the conflict. “Collateral damage” is a given.

Like almost everyone, I remember watching the towers burn that terrible morning. All those people on the high floors who felt like they had no choice but to jump—that was the worst. I try to imagine what it must have been like: The boiling clouds of heat pouring out of the windows behind you. The vertigo as you leapt into unsupported air. The tiger-hum of wind roaring in your ears. Fear exploding through every fucking cell of your body. Seconds away from certain death. Did it all happen too fast to take in? Did you pass out as the plummet reached maximum velocity? Was there a moment of grace? A feeling of flight? Or just a final flakburst of unimaginable pain when you slammed into the street as a bomb of blood and bones?

Was the whole horror show deliberately conceived? (*Of course, but conceived by whom?*) Was 9/11 a massive psyops campaign? Have we been kept right on the edge of World War III ever since so our collective fear and anxiety could be harvested?

I remember feeling an intense rush of relief when the second tower collapsed. I didn’t understand it at first, but then I realized that for all those people still trapped inside, their awful, despairing panic was finally over. Their souls were being set free from the Earth. To this day, I still believe the relief I felt was theirs as much as my own.

What good is a world that causes people to suffer like that? *Why cling to it?*

As I walk along Lexington, I start thinking about the basset hound that lived across the street from me in Morro Bay. Duncan was his name. Duncan was a digger. No fenced yard could contain him. He liked to show up in my front yard, especially when Pam and Trout were visiting. He was probably the most affectionate basset hound anyone had ever met—always begging with body wags to be petted by whoever was available, dispensing the occasional lick if the situation seemed to call for

it. His owner, Shelly, was an old hippie lady who taught art at San Luis Obispo's Montessori school. She said Duncan had been that way since he was a puppy. He adored all humans and couldn't seem to imagine anything bad ever coming from his encounters with them.

Well, one day Duncan was over visiting while Pam and I were standing around in the driveway, discussing her ideas about pruning back my rhododendrons and doing some future landscaping. Trout was on a long leather leash I was holding. He and Duncan were playing in that frisky puppy-wrestling way that dogs get into when one dog is a lot bigger than the other. Then Shelly stepped out on her front porch and called to Duncan, telling him to get his rogue basset butt back home. Duncan ran zigzagging out into the street, just as enthused to see Shelly as he was to see any of us. But then a silver minivan came tearing around the corner. I could've sworn it was going so fast that it went up on two wheels. There was a horrible thud and then a surprised howl—just about the worst sound I've ever heard—as Duncan went rolling under the van in a bloody, flailing heap.

Pam and Shelly and I ran to him as the van hit the brakes, skidded, and then decided to keep going. Poor Duncan was lying in the road with his long, floppy basset hound ears askew—already in shock—as blood foamed from his mouth and nostrils. He didn't look like he was going to make it, but Pam ran into the house to get some blankets while I called the local vet and Shelly flung open the back hatch on her Honda Civic and started clearing a space for him. As gently as we could, we got the blankets under Duncan's broken body and hoisted him into the Honda. The way he was looking at us—in so much pain, yet still somehow loving and trusting us—it just shredded my heart.

Maybe there's a reason why all-too-fallible humans have to get knocked around some, but why should innocent little creatures like Duncan have to suffer? I've never come up with a decent answer for that. There's a lot to love in this world, but on my darkest days—like the day Duncan got hit—I tend to think we'd all be better off if this entire ill-conceived planet was abolished and we returned to whatever afterlife awaits us.

Duncan ended up spending three days in doggy ICU. He had a fractured skull, some internal bleeding, a few broken ribs, and one of his legs had to be amputated. Then, after being put through all that agony, he died anyway.

I was never crass enough to ask Shelly how much the vet's bills came to in the end, but they must have been substantial. She ended up selling her house and moving away a few months later, probably to someplace smaller and meaner.

When I look up from my Duncan reverie, I find myself in the neighborhood known as Curry Hill, with its many shops and restaurants specializing in South Indian cuisine. There's a woman walking ahead of me in a shimmering gold silk dress that's almost see-through. She has long, thick black hair and a sensual way of walking that makes her ass look like a swaying bell. *It's Pam!* I think. I rush to catch up with her. But she's not Pam, of course. She's a smokey-eyed Hindu girl with beautiful brown skin and a red *tilak* dotting her forehead. She glances over her shoulder at me like I might be a potential rapist. At the next intersection I cross the street, headed away from her, so she won't think I'm a stalker.

The wind picks up, strewing cherry blossom petals across the sidewalk as if a parade has just passed by, leaving scatterings of organic confetti in its wake. On the sidewalk in front of the old George Washington Hotel at 24th and Lex (where Minoru Yamasaki and his team of architects drafted the early plans for the World Trade Center in the late 1960s), I see two burly guys in black shorts and T-shirts loading music equipment into the back of a van. I think to myself: *Is that how they got Pam? Two hired ninjas tossing her into a van with no more regard for her than roadies loading a drum kit?* She would have had a lot more to fear in that moment than that Hindu girl on high alert.

It must be terrifying at times to be a beautiful woman in this testosterone-crazed, male-dominated world. You never know when some muscled-up dude is going to forget you're a person and start treating you like his personal property.

My morbid and ungovernable imagination is starting to drive me crazy with vivid scenarios of how Pam's abductors might be torturing her. Sometimes having an extensive knowledge of the CIA's mind control programs and the American atrocities committed in places like Abu Ghraib isn't such a great thing. Not to mention the florid threats of rape and mutilation from Clonenhoof, now a permanent part of my mental landscape.

I'm feeling dizzy. My ribs are aching. My heart is racing. There's a good chance I'm hyperventilating. I also really need to pee. I decide it's time to head back to Crash's apartment to spend some serious time on the couch petting Trout.

I turn right on East 23rd to make a loop, so I'll see some different streets on my way back. I feel the need to be distracted. *Dissociated*. When I get to Park Avenue, I look up and see an enormous mural being painted by four guys on a window washer's platform. The mural itself is at least fourteen stories tall, with another eight or nine floors below it. It's an ad for Hannah Hart, the star of the weekly UTube series *My Drunk Kitchen*. It depicts Hannah in her kitchen with enormous glops of cake batter spilling out over a mixing bowl and dripping down across trompe l'oeil windows painted on the skyscraper's solid wall of bricks. The tagline reads: **U MAKE HAPPY FROM SCRATCH.**

Like the Dude Perfect billboard I saw earlier that morning, there's a snapshot tally of Hannah Hart's fans: +1,840,192. Not bad for a peppy LGBT-friendly girl, still in her twenties, who shot to fame by getting drunk in her sister's kitchen and making a grilled cheese sandwich (without cheese) in a UTube video titled "Butter Yo Shit." Going by sheer numbers, more people would seem to prefer trick sports shots over cooking shows for winos—but being around Pam has made me aware of the fact that nearly two million fans can translate into a very lucrative UTube partnership. Hannah Hart will probably rake in more money this year than the annual salary of a Supreme Court Justice (currently around \$250,000—excluding tips). It's crazy, but that's how America's social media sphere pays off when you get into the top tier of Internet celebrityhood.

When I get to Broadway, the wedge of cheesy Beaux-Arts goodness that is the Flatiron Building looms up before me like the prow of a 22-story limestone and terracotta cruise ship. I've always loved the Flatiron. We don't make buildings like that anymore. More typical of what gets built now is the slick, boxy high-rise at 23rd and Madison that I just walked by—all soulless glass and steel. It's a great way to keep construction costs low, but those glass towers aren't very energy-efficient and no one's going to miss them when they're torn down.

I wonder if the Flatiron has any public restrooms? *Probably not.* But then I see a couple of big orange Home Depot flags hanging off a building down the street, so I put a squeeze on my bladder and head there. There's always a place to pee inside a Home Depot, if you know where to look. *(HD Pro Tip #1: No, I'm not talking about the thicket of potted palm trees always present in the houseplants section, although I've seen them used for that purpose on occasion. When a contractor has to go, a potted palm seems just as good as any Port-a-John. It's also safer, if we're to judge by Skelly's experience.)*

As Home Depots go, this one must be sitting on the most expensive real estate, per square foot, of any Home Depot in North America. It occupies a massive, six-story Renaissance Revival style building with an elaborate cast-iron façade painted a gleaming white. But inside it looks just like any other Home Depot. When I walk in, the first thing I see is a big display case full of Gorilla Glue. Handy stuff, but those flared gorilla nostrils in the orange display banners are kind of a letdown after the impression left by the impressive storefront.

As I make my way past racks of Drano, Comet, and Sprayway Glass Cleaner, I hear the syrupy acoustic ballad “More Than Words” drizzling from the ceiling speakers. Back around 1990, it was the Number One single off Extreme's *Pornograffiti* album. *(Why do I even know shit like that? My mind is a cesspool of crappy pop culture references.)* I pass by some big stacks of Bounty paper towels (8pk \$12.87) and Scott toilet paper (9pk \$9.97) on my way to the escalator—which I ride down to the basement level—where the signs say the bathrooms are located. I

end up in the paint section. I go left, ignoring the houseplants section behind me, with its reddish-purple bromeliads, crazy cerulean blue orchids, and, yes, a jungly thicket of potted palms.

A nasally female voice interrupts “More Than Words” to ask Lewis (or Luis) to please “Dial 128.” Amplified to the point of distortion through the ceiling speakers, her voice is so jarring that it almost causes me to collide with a cardboard aisle display stacked with insulating foam sealant spray cans. (*HD Pro Tip #2: Keep that shit away from kids—they’ll use it like Mr. Bubble to make fake beards and mustaches. They’ll also spray it on the neighborhood cats and dogs, with unfortunate results; cats, especially, look weird when they’re shaved down to bare skin.*)

I walk past contractor bags, Brillo Pads, Clorox wipes, and shelves full of HDX All Purpose Degreaser. I can’t find any bathrooms where I’m looking. I must have gone the wrong way. So I cross behind the escalators and reverse direction, passing 25-foot Stanley PowerLocks, Hoover vacuum cleaners, leather gloves, cordless drills, reciprocating saws, and ball peen hammers. That’s what I love about Home Depots—they have everything you need to build, fix, or de-shitify anything. If you can’t find what you need at a Home Depot, then you probably don’t need it.

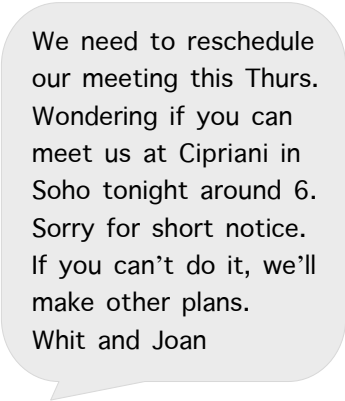
When I finally find the bathroom, the one and only urinal is so small and low to the ground that pissing into it makes me feel about eight years old. It might just be the power of suggestion, but my dick feels smaller in my hand than usual. Is it shriveling away because the transports of erotic tenderness that Pam once lavished upon it are now gone forever? I’m not sure I’ll want to go on living if I can’t find her again. Being with Pam made me feel like a man of the world; without her, I’m just a muddled boy.

That’s when I lose it. Leaning my head against the fake Morocco Slate self-stick vinyl tiles above a smelly mini-urinal in the middle of Manhattan, I feel the full weight of the collapsing star at the center of Pam’s black-hole-like absence. Its infinitely dense mass crushes my heart into a paper-thin smear of meat.

And there’s nothing in Home Depot that can fix that.

GETTING WISE TO THE WISNERS

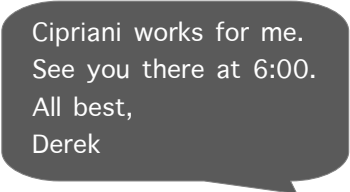
I don't know how long I spent in that Home Depot bathroom, holding my dick in a fugue of lost love. What snapped me out of it was a text message. I felt my iPhone vibrate in my pocket and when I looked at it, I saw this:



We need to reschedule
our meeting this Thurs.
Wondering if you can
meet us at Cipriani in
Soho tonight around 6.
Sorry for short notice.
If you can't do it, we'll
make other plans.
Whit and Joan

Whit and Joan Wisner are the literary agents I was supposed to be meeting later in the week. I'd completely forgotten about them. They're a husband-and-wife team, supposedly the best in the business (although I still think that Thomas Pynchon's wife, Melanie Jackson, is probably the better agent).

I really don't feel like having dinner with strangers in the next couple of hours. My first impulse is to cancel the meeting altogether. But then I think about it and realize that the Wisners might provide a good distraction from my current morbid state. If nothing else, I'll be able to get our book business out of the way, so I can completely focus all my energies on finding Pam. With that in mind, I text back:



Cipriani works for me.
See you there at 6:00.
All best,
Derek

What the hell have I just done? I feel like I'm insulting Pam by taking time out to pursue my vain, sweaty little quest to have a career in literature. I should be looking for her instead.

But where?

After I leave Home Depot, I catch a subway train downtown. I have a few hours to kill, so I end up wandering the streets of SoHo, back in Limnye territory. Could Pam be locked away in the bedroom of their apartment? I contemplate throwing a fistful of pebbles up at Limn and Conye's windows while aping Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—substituting "*Pam!*" for his tortured wails of "*Stella!*"—but I don't think that will get me anywhere. I still don't trust Conye, but I have a weird faith in Limn. If Limn says she hasn't seen Pam, then Pam's not there.

SoHo is full of lovely young women who don't seem to mind wearing black cocktail dresses in sunny weather. I also see a lot of European-looking men with slicked-back hair wearing dark sunglasses, bespoke suits, and fancy shoes. For every few dozen people I pass, at least two of them look like they could be models. It's that kind of place.

Okay, so maybe I'm exaggerating a little... but compared to the frumpy tourists with their fanny packs waddling around the docks in Morro Bay, SoHo is awash with class and sophistication.

We don't have stores like Fendi and Louis Vuitton across the street from Rosa's Shark Shack—although maybe that's a *good* thing....

Six o'clock rolls around soon enough and I find myself standing on the sidewalk between a life-sized chrome bull and the beautiful people having a beautiful day at the outdoor café tables beneath Cipriani's sunflower-yellow awning. The Italian waitstaff bustles around in white dinner jackets, white shirts, white bow ties, and black slacks. I recognize the semi-famous actress and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model, Kate Upton, seated front and center. The crowd is convivial, almost sparkling with unforced joy. It's a perfect example of why the rich enjoy dining out.

Three big, burly, overweight Italian guys are sitting on a raised concrete platform just to the right of the restaurant. One of them wears a gray felt hat cut into the jagged shape of a fairy tale king's crown, with gemstone-colored buttons pinned all over it—a Jughead whoopee cap. The three men seem a little drunk in that way men get when they're feeling on top of the world. I want to ask them what they're celebrating, maybe find out who they are (*Mafia made men? Cipriani's owners? Some Italian iteration in-between?*), but at that very moment someone grasps my elbow. I turn to gape into the plastic-surgery-distorted face of Joan Wisner.

"Derek! You made it!"

She kisses me on both cheeks in the exuberant European fashion that I've never really mastered. I hope she didn't catch me grimacing at her. Joan looks like a pudgy gargoyle wearing a young Irishwoman's scalp. Her nipped-and-tucked old socialite's face is at odds with her yarn-like, unruly red hair—vampire chic oozing beneath a Raggedy Ann doll wig. The cheetah-spotted retro cat eye glasses on her upturned nose don't help. I'm sure she thinks they're fun and adorably wacky, but the oversized lenses seem to magnify her bat-like features.

Tall, patrician, grey-haired Whit stands behind Joan in a navy blue suit, looking his age—over seventy. He smiles and shakes my hand. Unlike his flamboyant, caftan-clad wife, Whit's

appearance is well groomed and dignified. He's sort of a milder version of Al Pacino in *The Godfather Part III*, with maybe a hint of Russian wolfhound thrown in for friendliness and rapport.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he says. His hand feels strong and warm. "They've reserved a table for us in back. Let's go have a seat."

As I follow the Wisners into the crowded restaurant, I notice that a lot of the diners are craning their necks to get a look at them. Others grin and wave hello. Whit and Joan wave back and nod their heads like twin popes dispensing blessings. 'The Mighty Wisners' are legends in the publishing industry. The roster of famous authors their agency represents is nothing short of astonishing. (I did some research before I booked our flight out to New York.) They've had a firm grip on the tiller of literary culture for over forty years. Why they've developed a sudden interest in me, I have no fucking clue.

"I couldn't tell... was that Victoria Silvstedt or Kate Upton out there in front?" Joan asks of no one in particular as she squeezes behind a table in the far back corner of the restaurant. The effort makes her short of breath.

"I'm almost sure it was Kate Upton," I say, "although I can't say I've seen Victoria Silvstedt before."

"The former Miss Sweden? You've seen her," Whit tells me. "She's been on the covers of at least 500 magazines. Excuse me for just a moment." He turns and walks over to the table in the other corner across from ours, where a portly man, seated alone, is digging into a bowl of pasta.

"Harvey..." Whit says, taking the chair across from him and sitting down, as if they're old friends.

"*Whit!*" Harvey responds with blustery good cheer. He leans over the table to confer with him. I can't hear what they're saying.

"Come sit by me, dear," Joan says, patting my hand. I take the seat next to her. "Whit just had to say hello to Harvey. He'll be right back."

“Who’s Harvey?” I ask, demonstrating my social cluelessness (*might as well get that out of the way, right up front...*).

“Harvey Weinstein? The movie producer?” Joan seems scandalized that I wouldn’t recognize the co-founder of Miramax and the Weinstein Company in a crowded restaurant. “We’ve done a lot of deals with him. We might even get him interested in one of *your* books, if you play your cards right.”

“I almost never play my cards right,” I admit, thinking of my inglorious architecture career and my failed marriage.

“No, I don’t believe that you do...” Joan says with an enigmatic grin. “Most people don’t. But when I was your age, I was already the most sought-after literary agent in New York.”

“How’d you pull *that* off?” I ask her.

“Well, I had a good head on my shoulders and I gave as good as I got.” Joan must think I’m looking confused by that statement, because she quickly adds: “I was the only agent who’d give a knobber to any publisher willing to pay a big advance for my clients’ books.”

“What’s a knobber?” I ask her.

“I gave head, dear. What can I say? It was the seventies.”

“Oh.” I’m having a hard time imagining Joan sucking off the august titans of the publishing industry—although maybe she was prettier forty years ago.

“Don’t look so taken aback,” she chides me. “It happens all the time. It’s legitimate currency in the entertainment industry. How do you think Cameron Diaz got the part in that Scorsese film? *Gangs of New York*. She gave Harvey there a knobber.” She raises her voice. “Didn’t she, Harvey?” she calls out to him. “Cameron Diaz gave you a knobber!”

“I’ve never gotten a knobber in my life!” Harvey laughs in answer to her.

Whit wraps up his business with Harvey and comes back to our table to sit down. “I take it my wife has been regaling you

with tales of famous fellatrices,” he says to me. “How did *that* get started?”

“I was explaining how I got ahead in this business of ours.”

“Getting ahead by giving head—a time-honored tradition,” says Whit with a wry grin. “I can assure you, Joanie’s rather phenomenal skills in that department are still intact. Not that I have much use for them in my decrepit old age.”

“If I looked more like Cameron Diaz you’d be using them.”

“I’m not her type,” Whit demurs. “Isn’t she going out with that nice young billionaire, Sean Combs—or whatever he’s calling himself these days... you know... *Puff Daddy*?”

“You’re behind the times, as usual,” Joan says. “Cameron dumped P. Diddy and closed the deal with a boy guitarist named Benji Madden. They got married in January after dating for two whole weeks. But there’s an old rumor making the rounds again that *Kate Upton*—sitting out there in front—is dating P. Diddy now. The tabloids are calling them Diddy-Up.”

“You can always count on the tabloids for mendacious, moronic rumors. I don’t believe a word of it. How about you, Derek?”

“I don’t know anything about Kate Upton and Sean Combs,” I say, “but I could tell you some stories about Conye Best, if you’re interested.”

The Wisners claim to be *very* interested. So I sketch out what happened to me over the last twenty-four hours. During that time, we’re served appetizer plates of beef carpaccio and a pretty tasty Nero d’Avola.

“Oh my...” Joan says toward the end of my narrative, “I hope your sweetheart’s okay.”

“We know some people who might be able to help you find her,” Whit offers.

“Who?” Joan asks him.

“My acquaintances at Kroll.”

Kroll. The name sounds familiar. *Didn't they have something to do with 9/11?* I remember reading about that somewhere—something about Kroll being put in charge of updating security at the World Trade Center right after the 1993 bombing. I also recall that they hired the FBI Al Qaeda expert, John O'Neill, to head up WTC security just a few weeks before the towers fell. I know he died during the attacks, but the details escape me now.

“Oh no you don't...” Joan says to her husband with a shake of her red yarn tresses. She turns to me. “You don't want to get mixed up with that crew: ex-CIA spooks cashing in on the private sector, raking it in hand-over-fist. Stay away, Derek. They're bad news. Besides, you can't afford them.”

“But everything they do is state-of-the-art,” Whit protests.

“If you're a multi-billion-dollar corporation, I'm sure they're fine,” Joan says. “But I wouldn't trust them with Derek here.”

I'm starting to like Joan. But the paranoid side of me says, *Maybe that's the whole point.*

“I already have the NYPD looking into it,” I say. “And my brother has a bunch of hackers helping us out. I'm hoping we'll catch a break soon.”

“I hope so, too,” Joan says. “For your sake, as well as hers. It can't be easy, not knowing where she is—or what's happening to her.”

“It's been driving me crazy,” I admit. “That's why I'm here. I thought a little distraction might be good for me. I was starting to lose it.”

“Well, we're very good at distracting people, aren't we, Whit?”

“In your prime, you were one of the best,” Whit says to his wife with genuine fondness.

“I'm *still* good at it,” Joan says, squeezing my knee beneath the table. “Whit's just too old now to keep up.”

“So—let's talk about your books,” says Whit.

“You have a fan at Farrar, Straus and Giroux,” Joan tells me.

“Someone who very much wants to see your novels properly published,” Whit fills in for her. “E-books are fine when you’re making a name for yourself. But now that you’ve *arrived*, it’s time to stop treating your books like so many bags of potato chips and put them on the shelf at the publishing house equivalent of Hermès or Louis Vuitton.”

“Well, I’m flattered,” I say, “but I also can’t help thinking I’m being steamrolled by bullshit here. And by the way, I’m not writing books for rich elitists; I’m on the other side of the Louis Vuitton equation.”

“Your books deserve a wide audience—and Farrar, Straus and Giroux can give you that audience,” Whit says to me, taking a paternal tone. “It’s not about writing for elitists. It’s about gaining respectability by being plucked out of the Kindling Direct slumlord distribution model. I know you think your subject matter is too politically subversive and risqué for a traditional publisher to take on, but you’re wrong about that.”

“So far, I’ve been right about that...” I counter.

“I’ll admit most publishers are timid. They like their humor no more daring than what you’ll find in the Hallmark greeting card section at your local drugstore. They tend to get nervous when a satirist like you comes along, who goes beyond the pale. They’re also deathly afraid of lawsuits.”

“Essentially, they’re a bunch of cowards,” Joan sums up for me. “But we know some people with integrity. People willing to stand up to the mega-billionaire cyber-bullies like Jeb Bezos, who are robbing authors blind.”

“That’s what my next book is about,” I say. “It’s called *The Book of Bezos*.”

“We know. That’s why we contacted you,” says Whit.

“How could you know? I haven’t even published it yet.”

“We were tipped off about it. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“No, we *won’t* just be leaving it at that,” I say, aware that I’m no longer *playing my cards right*, in Joan’s parlance. “I’d like to

know how you found out about a book that I haven't told anyone I'm writing, aside from my brother and my girlfriend."

Whit lets out a long, theatrical sigh. "I think I mentioned my acquaintances at Kroll..." he says.

"Kroll was *spying* on me?"

"They're paid to monitor email traffic for certain keywords like *satire*, *Beezos*, *Glamazon*, *fascist fucksticks*, and so on. Sometime in January, your emails to your brother raised a red flag. So yes... from that moment, you were being spied upon."

My brother has been after me for years to protect our email correspondence with PGP encryption—which stands for Pretty Good Protection—but that stuff is complicated and I've never bothered to sit down and figure it out. Basically, how it works is you download some special software that generates a 'public key' for you—a super-long string of random keystroke characters—which then acts as a password for PGP-encrypted data that people can use to communicate with you without being snooped on. At least I *think* that's how it works. I've never actually used it. But once again, it looks like Crash had the right idea.

"Have they got the whole book?" I ask Whit.

"Just the first hundred pages that you sent to your brother in PDF format. But that's enough to earn you a six-figure advance from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, if you'll agree to let them publish your other books, as well."

"Try thinking of this as a *good* thing, dear," Joan says, squeezing my knee beneath the table again. "Because it is. In fact, it's so good—for you, for us, *everyone*—that I'll give you a knobber if it'll help seal the deal."

"Everyone loves Joan's knobbers," Whit effuses.

I can feel my penis retreating into my abdominal cavity like a cobra diving underground to flee a honey badger. The thought of getting a blowjob from that old crone is about as appealing to me as teabagging a Gila monster.

"Thanks, but we can probably work this out without resorting to the knobber option," I say in as diplomatic a tone as I can muster. "So you're saying I'll get some nebulous six-figure advance if I sign over the rights to all my books to some publishing company—"

"No just *any* publishing company," Whit interrupts me. "Farrar, Straus and Giroux: the home to some of the most distinguished authors in the world."

"We're talking Noble Prize winners, Pulitzer Prize winners, National Book Award winners—the whole schmear," Joan adds. "Who do you like, as a writer? Who writes the kind of stuff that makes you go '*Oh crap, I wish I'd written that*'...?"

"I don't know..." I waffle, "there are too many to name."

"How about Jonathan Franzen? *The Corrections*. *Purity*. You look to me like you're a Franzen guy."

"Sure. *The Corrections* is one of my favorite books."

"Well, FSG publishes Franzen. Who else? Denis Johnson? *Jesus' Son*. *Tree of Smoke*. You seem like the type."

"Of course."

"Well, they also publish him. How about Roberto Bolaño? *The Savage Detectives*. 2666. I know you quoted him in your last book."

"Great writer..." I say

"FSG publishes him, too—even though he's dead."

"What about Thomas Pynchon?" I ask.

"He publishes with Penguin. Probably his wife's doing," says Joan. "There's no accounting for taste."

"Padgett Powell?"

"Who the hell is Padgett Powell?" Joan asks me.

"Another great writer. Right up there with Charles Portis and Barry Hannah."

“He likes some of the more obscure writers from the Deep South, dear,” Whit says to his wife.

“Well, I can’t help you there...” Joan says. “It’s not my area of expertise. I make authors into stars. I call them my twinklies.”

“Isn’t that a term of endearment for Thai ladyboys?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Joan squints at me as if my lame attempt at humor was a momentary lapse in good table manners. “What you should be asking yourself is: ‘Am I ready to become a star?’ Because not everyone is.”

“Some authors don’t take well to fame,” Whit cautions me.

“How can you be so sure my books will make me famous?” I ask them. “Nobody reads anymore.”

“When you sign with us, it’s no longer just about books,” Whit says.

“We’ll be selling movie rights, getting you interviews, TV appearances, *Charlie Rose*, NPR—the works,” Joan puts in.

“Sounds horrible,” I say, meaning it. David Foster Wallace was the last author I bothered to see interviewed by Charlie Rose—and that was painful to watch. No wonder he offed himself.

“Hook up with us,” Joan says with a lewd lick of her lips, “and I can practically guarantee you’ll have ‘Fuck You’ money in a few years.”

“How much money is that?” I ask her as she stuffs a blood-red, paper-thin slice of beef carpaccio into her maw. “Because if I have to go on *Charlie Rose* and NPR to talk about myself like some self-obsessed jackass, I’m kind of inclined to say ‘Fuck You’ right now.” Again—*not playing my cards right*....

Whit intervenes: “Not every author has to do interviews. We can go the Thomas Pynchon route, if you’re more comfortable with that.”

“It makes everything a lot harder,” Joan says, chewing, “but if you sign with FSG, anything’s possible.”

“And if I sign with FSG, what happens to my royalty rate? Because right now I’m making seventy percent with Glamazon.”

“It goes down, of course, but you’re only selling e-books right now,” Whit points out. “And for not much money, I might add. Even with your books ranking in the Kindling Top 500, your paperback sales have been negligible— isn’t that correct?”

I nod my chin. There’s no use arguing. He’s dead right.

“When FSG brings out your books, you’ll have hardcover sales, paperback sales, and e-book sales all at once—at much higher prices than you could command on your own—which will more than compensate for the lower royalty rates.”

“Plus,” says Joan, squeezing my knee for a third time, “you’ll get reviews and blurbs from other famous authors, which will help drive sales and get you into bookstores and libraries. The whole thing will just snowball, success feeding on success.”

“We’ve seen it happen many times before,” Whit says. “We know what we’re doing. You just have to trust us.”

Can I trust the Wisners? That’s the big question. I don’t have an answer to that yet.

“Can I think about it?” I ask them.

“Of course. We know it’s a big decision,” says Whit. “You can take as much time as you like.”

“As long as you get back to us by tomorrow,” Joan jokes.

“Now—what should we have to eat?” Whit asks with a contented air, as if the business part of our conversation has been concluded. “Has anyone looked at a menu?”

No one has, so I pick up a menu and make a show of examining it, but I’m so distracted by my thoughts that my eyes just skid across the bill of fare without comprehending it.

Not for the first time, I’m wondering if I’ll end up being the main course.

THE OCTOPUS AND AMISH PUPS, PART I

When I get back to Crash's apartment, there's a note for me Scotch-taped to the front door. I open it and read:

DEREK,

I HAD TO GO TAKE CARE OF SOME LATE-NIGHT BUSINESS WITH LAYLON. TROUT HAS BEEN FED AND WALKED. THERE'S LASAGNA IN THE FRIDGE IF YOU HAVEN'T EATEN.

I WAS THINKING WE COULD DRIVE OUT TO LANCASTER PA TOMORROW AND ADOPT AN AMISH PUP. ARE YOU UP FOR THAT?

NO NEWS ABOUT PAM YET, BUT MY HACKER FRIENDS SAY THEY'RE CLOSING IN ON CLONENHOOF.

G

I use Crash's spare key to let myself in. Trout is right there by the door, waiting for me, wagging his tail like a furry maniac. I pet him as he walks around me in circles, poking his head through my legs, rubbing the length of his body against my inner

knees like I'm a car wash, then going around and poking his nose through my legs again. We do that about twenty times, and then I take him out for another walk—just in case.

Man, I'm so glad to see Trout. Like most people, I feel much less inclined to cave in to paralyzing despair when I'm hanging out with an affectionate, intelligent dog. Crash has the right idea, adopting that Amish pup.

I check my iPhone while Trout leads me around the outer perimeter of Bryant Park. There's a voicemail from Crash containing pretty much the same information that was in the note on the door. I must have missed it during all the loud, smutty talk and glasses of grappa with the Wisners in Cipriani. I'd never had grappa before. I found out that I like it—but I made a conscious effort not to overindulge. I only had a slight buzz going when the Wisners bid me goodnight. And now I'm feeling wired from the cappuccinos and cannoli that capped off our evening. It'll be a while before I can sleep.

When Trout and I get back to the apartment, I turn on Crash's big flat-screen TV and we stretch out on his leather couch. Trout rolls onto his back and goes spread-canine, resting his head in my lap while showing me the underside of his furry chin and his smiling black jowls. When I stroke the thick white hair on his ribs, he bares his fangs and lets his tongue loll out, upside down. He starts to pant while his tail whaps against the couch's cushions. His one golden-brown eye flicks around—looking at me, looking away, looking back—while his blue eye stays weirdly focused on the television. He doesn't seem to be missing Pam all that much, although that might not be a fair assessment for me to make. We can't exactly talk about it.

Trout likes dog movies—*Beethoven*, *The Shaggy D.A.*, *Best in Show*... it doesn't matter, as long as it has dogs in it—but I can't find any dog shows as I click through the channels with my thumb on the remote. I stop on Bill Maher joking with Anthony Weiner, aka Carlos Danger, about those asshole Republicans. It makes me realize that the only politicians I even *remotely* trust (with emphasis on that word *remotely*) are politicians who've

suffered through character assassinations in the mainstream media. People like Anthony “*I Tweeted Pics of My Congressional Boners*” Weiner, Eliot “*I Screwed Myself out of the New York Governor’s Job*” Spitzer... and maybe even ol’ Bill “*I Did Not Have Sex With That Woman, But I Might Have Splooged on her Blue Dress and Smoked a Cigar Basted in her Vaginal Juices as a Presidential Morale Booster*” Clinton. The way I see it, if the hateful, anti-democratic forces in our society decide to take down a cultural spokesperson for being too horny, then that person must be doing *something* right.

I’m reminded of J. Edgar Hoover and his COINTELPRO minions, how they used wiretaps and electronic bugs to create a sex tape Greatest Hits package of Martin Luther King’s so-called “orgiastic” extramarital liaisons, which the FBI then threatened to send to news organizations in an attempt to blackmail him into committing suicide:

“Lend your sexually psychotic ear to the enclosure...” an accompanying letter advised King, thirty-four days before he was due to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. *“Listen to yourself, you filthy, abnormal animal. You are on the record. (...) You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy fraudulent self is bared to the nation.”*

To the great credit of the press in 1964, no one accepted the proffered tape recordings from the FBI and turned the story into a front-page scandal. (They would have had no way of knowing if the tapes were real or faked.) I can’t imagine Fox News or the *New York Post* behaving with anywhere near that kind of circumspection today. They’d be fucking gleeful:

F.B.I. STINGS KING’S FLINGS

Maher segues into the “New Rules” section of his show and I watch that for a while. Comedians seem to be the only people left in the mainstream media that are telling the truth these days. Comedy thrives on truth—often the sort of uncomfortable truth

that we'd prefer to ignore. Laughter and radical honesty can free us from the mental prison cells we've exiled ourselves to through dissociation. When we dissociate, it's usually a maladaptive attempt to isolate ourselves from pain by being out-of-body, or to avoid difficult-to-face facts by hiding behind the padded walls of irrelevant distractions. If we can laugh at ourselves, it shows we've reached a deeper understanding of the absurd and often appalling circumstances we're all enmeshed in on this planet. Humor allows us to step away from the matrix.

The opposite of humor is willful blindness and an obsession with controlling others through the use of force—which is what the Deep State is all about.

At the end of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, I click through the channels again, but nothing appeals to me. I'm finding it harder than usual to sink into mindless, passive enjoyment of the Spectacle because I keep getting reminded of the psyops at work behind the scenes: Great American Zombie Bombs, weapons of mass culture. I see Sylvester Stallone doing his Rambo act in faux-Afghanistan (*Be a badass, all you dead-eyed young dudes, and sign up for the military!*), Miley Cyrus performing in concert (*Follow my Disney-Illuminaughty trajectory, all you nubile tweens, and evolve into ambisexual super-sluts!*), a lame attempt at softcore porn called *Spring Break 08: Three Days of the Cougar* on Cinemax (*Are you jacking off to our bouncing, silicone-inflated boobs yet? Why not? It's a great waste of time and energy!*), and a glum, nihilistic ice-zombie movie on HBO (*no, wait—that was Game of Thrones... go back! Oh, fuck no—skip it—too depressing with its theme that dominance is all that matters...*). Then I land on CNN—with its usual assortment of tragedies, maladies, atrocities, Islamic suicide cults, imperialistic false flag ops, and congressional malfeasance—which just makes everything seem worse.

Finally, I get sick of it all and click off the television. For a while I just sit there on the sofa petting Trout and listening to the thin, high-pitched humming in my ears. That's tinnitus—or so I've been told—but I often like to think of it as a fax signal from the Invisible College, downloading information into my brain that will be useful for my writing.

I get up and go outside to pace around on the balcony like a doleful elephant in an unattended zoo. I'm wondering when Crash will be home. I want to talk to him about Pam, about Clonenhoof, about my meeting with the Wisners. Ever since that meeting, a quote from a book about Andy Kaufman has been running through my head—words of wisdom from the “brilliant clinical psychologist” Dr. Stan Martindale, as applied to Andy's schizoid comedy career:

“Once they pay you for something you love doing, they kill it for you.”

My subconscious seems to be telling me to turn down the offer from the Wisners, but I'd like to bounce my thoughts off Crash before I make that decision. Living in New York has provided him with more opportunities to turn his art into money than I'll ever get—and I'm sure he's dealt with his share of rich, unscrupulous characters like the Wisners. I look down into the street from eleven floors up, hoping to see him heading home along the sidewalk, but no such luck. Across the street, I glimpse the darkened carousel where Pam was abducted. Thinking about her again sends my whole body into a shuddering clench—my longing for her is that intense.

I feel so alone. So alone and utterly fucking useless.

Through some weird fluke of associative thinking, probably having to do with New York art world profiteering and lost love, I remember listening to Laurie Anderson's avant-pop masterpiece, “O Superman” late one night on Dr. Demento's radio show in the dark of my college bedroom. I was under the sheets with a wildly intelligent girl named Lisa Bonney, my first real love. She was two years away from getting her master's degree in chemical engineering. Even then, I knew she would leave me someday for a clandestine career in the military-industrial complex. “*When love is gone, there's always justice,*” Laurie Anderson eerily sang to us from inside an answering machine. “*And when justice is gone, there's always force.*” *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...* went the mesmerizing loop on her Eventide Harmonizer. “*And when force is gone, there's always Mom.*”

“Hi Mom!”

Maternal comfort is not an option for me. Mom, in my case, is a hypercritical, pill-popping nudist with a walloping case of Borderline Personality Disorder. We’ve never been close.

About then, on the Mom thought, Trout noses out through the French door I left ajar. He joins me on the balcony, toenails clicking across the concrete. When he sits on his haunches next to me with a mild dog-yawn, I crouch to pet him. We stay down there for quite a long time, just listening to the sounds of the city. The vacuum wheeze of air brakes heralds the low rumbling of a city bus as it wends its way along Fifth Avenue—a giant mechanical caterpillar surrounded by the sweeping fizz of passing cars and the occasional beeping of a taxi. High above us, we hear the cloud-scouring thrum of a passenger jet soaring through the night. Trout and I tilt our heads, looking for the landing lights. Somewhere close by, a garbage trunk empties a dumpster full of clanging and clanking glass bottles that crescendos like a waterfall of ice tumbling down the chute of a cement mixer. A drunk guy in the park yells something vaguely Irish and obscene (*“Y’ fookin’ Harpies almos’ kilt me!”*). Then a police siren whoops and blats angry electronic noise, dopplering toward us down the corridor of a distant street.

Trout looks at me and licks his furry jowls, telepathically conveying: *Maybe it’s time for a midnight snack....*

We go back inside. I take a look in Crash’s refrigerator and scoop a few spoonfuls of cooked beef from the leftover lasagna into Trout’s bowl. I eat a spoonful myself—*not bad*, even though it’s cold. While Trout eats, I head to the tiny bathroom inside Crash’s orgone box bedroom, where I brush my teeth and change into pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved T-shirt. When I come back out, Trout is already up on the bed with one of Pam’s lacy black bras between his paws. He must have stolen it from her suitcase. I decide to let him keep it. We all need our tokens of comfort during trying times.

When I turn out the lights and get beneath the sheets, I feel Trout move over and lean his heavy body against my legs,

warming them. Once again, I'm reminded of how grateful I am to have him with me. I close my eyes and try to relax in the windowless, too-quiet room. I find myself missing the city's noisy, ceaseless indications of life. The only sound I hear is the subtle snuffling and susurrant of Trout consoling himself with Pam's bra in the all-enveloping dark.

It's enough. I know I'm not alone. I drift off into a troubled sleep, plagued by dreams of a dirty toilet bowl so clogged with turds that I can't get it to flush.



"So they were spying on you and they stole your manuscript, but you *still* think it might be okay to sign with them?"

That's Crash, talking about the Wisners. We're in a big black Volvo SUV that he rented from Hertz for the trip out to Pennsylvania. Crash is driving. I'm riding shotgun, thinking that maybe my big brother has a point—but *hey, I was pretty sure I wouldn't be signing any contracts with them, anyway.*

So lighten up, bro.

Trout is in the backseat. At least *he* isn't looking at me like I'm a total dickwad.

"I was just saying it might be nice to be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux," I explain, in my defense.

"Do you really think that'll happen?" Crash asks me. "I mean, you can try.... Just don't go into this with your eyes wide shut. It sounds to me more like a sneaky way to get your books *out* of circulation, by tying up your publishing rights."

"I've been thinking pretty much the same thing," I admit, although that's not exactly true. It just makes so much sense to me when I hear Crash say it that I feel compelled to agree with him.

"I think the Wisners were feeling you out, to see how you'd react. I'm pretty sure you and Pam have been touched by a tentacle of the Octopus."

“What does that even *mean?*—*the Octopus....*”

“Have you ever heard of a book called *The Octopus* by Kenn Thomas and Jim Keith? It’s about the Deep State and the death of Danny Casolaro.”

The title is familiar to me from my research into parapolitics. “I’ve seen some references to it,” I say, “but I’ve never gotten around to reading it.”

“Well, you should, because like Madge used to say in that old Palmolive commercial: ‘You’re soaking in it.’ The Octopus was Danny Casolaro’s name for what Peter Dale Scott now calls the Deep State, and what Colonel Fletcher Prouty used to call the Secret Team.”

“So, basically, it’s the same group of evil bastards that I was talking to Conye about when we were high: *the Illuminati*.”

“Basically, yeah. Danny Casolaro was sort of this dilettante, self-financed reporter—too unworldly to realize that the mainstream media has no interest in alienating their Deep State backers by telling them the truth about themselves—but he was tenacious and he probably got closer to figuring the whole thing out than anyone ever had before him. And they killed him for it.”

“Shit,” I say, although it’s not the first time I’ve heard of someone getting killed because he or she got too close to nailing down the truth about the Deep State. Gary Webb reporting on the CIA starting a crack epidemic in America’s inner cities during the Iran-Contra operation, Gary Caradori investigating rumors of a nationwide child prostitution ring involving prominent politicians during the Franklin Scandal... they both met mysterious ends. Webb was shot twice in the head, but his death was ruled a suicide. Caradori’s small plane exploded in midair the day after he called Senator Loran Schmit (the chairman of the Nebraska Legislature’s investigative committee) to tell him that with the new evidence he’d discovered, they were going to have the Franklin Scandal suspects “by the short hairs.” The briefcase full of documents that Caradori had with him on that flight went missing, of course—but hey, shit happens, right?

Of course, there were others: Michael Hastings, Bill Cooper, Philip Marshall, Anna Politkovskaya, Serena Shim... maybe even Bill Hicks, Stanley Kubrick, and Hunter S. Thompson. Then there was the strange fate of Crash's neo-conceptual artist-hero, Mark Lombardi, who was found hanged in his Brooklyn apartment right before a major gallery show that was to debut his monumental *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91*. That wall-sized drawing revealed how the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (and its nefarious counterpart in the Cayman Islands, the International Credit and Investment Corporation) had laundered money for "a panoply of international gangsters, arms dealers, bagmen, corrupt foreign officials, drug smugglers, tax evaders" and "elements of the intelligence services of the U.S., U.K., Pakistan, U.A.E., and Saudi Arabia." We're talking about people like Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Manuel Noriega, the Medellin Cartel, key figures in the Iran-Contra operation, and CIA director Richard Helms (who holds the distinction of being the only Director of Central Intelligence ever to be convicted of lying to Congress—although they *all* lied or concealed the truth about their activities to some extent, of course...).

But no one on that list would even *think* of ordering a hit on a too-curious Brooklyn artist, right?

"So how did Danny *What's-His-Name* die?" I ask Crash.

"Danny *Casolaro*. Let's just call him Danny—it's easier. He supposedly committed suicide in 1991. He was found naked in a Sheraton Hotel bathtub in Martinsburg, West Virginia, with his wrists slashed. But the cuts went too deep—right through his tendons. And there were way too many of them—around a dozen, with no hesitation marks. There was also blood all over the bathroom floor that someone had tried to clean up with a bunch of towels, like they were wiping away footprints.

"No one who knew Danny thought he was the suicidal type. He was connecting the dots on a huge story and he was thrilled by it. He talked about it all the time. He was in Martinsburg to meet a source who was supposed to give him the information he

needed to ‘bring back the head of the Octopus’—or so he told people right before he left. His housekeeper said he took a fat accordion file folder with him that contained his research notes and the book he was working on, but it wasn’t in the hotel room when his body was found—and it never turned up. The whole thing seemed suspicious.”

“No shit,” I say. “So what was the story he was working on?”

“Well, that’s just it... it was a monster story—a story with a multi-tentacled villain that’s going to strangle every one of us if we can’t find a way to subdue it first. It gets into everything: the collapse of BCCI, the Canadian weapons genius Gerald Bull and *his* assassination, computer spying with back doors built into software that’s used by international banks and governments, pay-offs to the Ayatollah Khomeini that sealed the deal on Reagan’s October Surprise, CIA drug-running and back-channel weapons deals with Iran and the Nicaraguan Contras—*all of it*. Once you start to see what Danny Casolaro was looking at, it’s like the entire history of the Deep State captured in a hologram. But you have to keep circling around it, looking at each individual tentacle on the Octopus, before you can begin to comprehend the whole thing.”

“Sounds complicated,” I say, looking out the window at the shit-blasted industrial landscape of New Jersey: train tracks, smokestacks, giant electrical towers, blackened highway bridges, reed-choked swamps, and dirt lots full of industrial cranes and abandoned tractor-trailer rigs.

“It *is* complicated...” Crash admits, “but if you want to understand how things have gotten so screwed up in 21st-century America, this is the key.”

I let out a yawn. “Can we stop and get some coffee before we dive into this crap?” I ask him. “If I don’t get some caffeine in my system, I’ll probably fade into cognitive dissonance before you can even explain to me who Gerald Bull is....”

Trout stands up in the Volvo’s backseat and lets loose with a frisky yip. He leans over and sniffs my ear, snuffling around in

there. It tickles. I'm getting the impression that Trout thinks coffee is a good idea, too.

"Mark Lombardi did a drawing about Gerald Bull's Deep State connections," Crash informs me, changing lanes so we can take the next off-ramp. "Bull designed a 'supergun' for Saddam Hussein that was supposed to be capable of shooting a satellite into orbit. They called it Project Babylon."

"Is that anything like the *Babalon Working* that Jack Parsons got up to out in the desert with his black magick pal, L. Ron Hubbard?" I ask.

I'd written about the Babalon Working in my first book, *Crash Gordon and the Mysteries of Kingsburg*. Parsons had been the co-founder of a rocket research group at Cal Tech that morphed into the Jet Propulsion Laboratory—NASA's premier rocket science center—but he was also an acolyte of Aleister Crowley, who'd personally selected Parsons to lead the California lodge of a secret society known as the Ordo Templi Orientis (Order of the Oriental Templars, or OTO). So Jack Parsons was some kind of Rocket-Building Antichrist, basically.

No novelist could make up shit that good and have it come off as even remotely plausible. The Babalon Working, undertaken in 1946 and '47, was Jack Parsons' attempt (using a lot of good old-fashioned ritual sex magick) to conceive a Moonchild that would serve as a physical incarnation for the Great Whore of Babylon—a role that Katy Perry now seems to have taken on, if one can judge by her performance at the 2015 Super Bowl.

Certain members of the Ordo Templi Orientis now regard the Babalon Working as one of the OTO's greatest success stories. The way they see it, Parsons and his tubby malign sidekick, L. Ron Hubbard (of later Scientology fame), pried open an interdimensional energy portal and something magickally fucked slouched through it. In their Crowley-warped minds, it's no mere coincidence that Kenneth Arnold spotted the first modern American UFOs skipping across the clouds above Mt. Rainier on June 24th, 1947, just as Parsons was finishing up his Enochian sex tricks. The Roswell Crash, several days later in

early July, only seemed to confirm that the OTO's Dynamic Duo had hit the Babalonian sweet spot with their fervently polished magick roods. Little grey aliens have been abducting and anally probing hapless out-of-work lumberjacks and juicy high school majorettes ever since.

"There's no connection between Parsons and Bull that I'm aware of," Crash tells me, "except maybe on an interdimensional level—which is where all this stuff makes the most sense, really."

He pulls off the road into a cruddy-looking Dunkin' Donuts drive-thru and we order two large iced coffees with extra cream and sugar. I also get something called a Sweet Black Pepper Bacon Sandwich to split with Trout, who scarfs that thing down like it's the most amazing treat he's ever been offered. I end up giving him almost the whole thing. It makes me happy to watch him chew with his toothy dog grin and then lick his jowls and nose me for more.

Once we're back on the road, I take a big gulp of coffee and say, "Okay, so explain the Octopus to me. I'm ready."

"This is all just off the top of my head," says Crash, by way of introduction, "so I might get a few of the details wrong. But you can always look this stuff up online, if you want to get deep into it. I'll just hit the highlights for now and you can stop me, at any time, if something doesn't seem clear, okay?"

"Fair enough," I say with a shake of my jumbo-sized plastic to-go cup. The ice tumbles around in there like rocks, making a very satisfying sound to my ears.

"Danny Casolaro was one of the founders of *Computer Age* magazine back in the eighties, so he had a background in journalism with a focus on emerging information technology," Crash says, keeping his eyes focused on the highway and his hands on the Volvo's steering wheel as he talks. It reminds me that he's always been somewhere on the spooky-genius side of the autism spectrum. His brain just doesn't work like mine. His ability to recall obscure facts and dates is almost scary, like some unbeatable contestant on *Jeopardy!* who's always saying: "*I'll take the Deep State for \$500, Alex.*"

“Around 1990, Danny started looking into a company called Inslaw that was suing the U.S. government because it claimed the Department of Justice had reneged on its contract to pay for Inslaw’s enhanced version of its people-tracking computer database software. That software was known as PROMIS—which stands for Prosecutor’s Management Information System. To put it simply, Inslaw was accusing the Department of Justice of software piracy. But Danny quickly found out that it was much more complicated than that. PROMIS was sort of the Rosetta Stone of data-tracking software. With just a few tweaks, it could be used to track *anything*. It had over 570,000 lines of code, which, in those days, was *a lot*. It was designed to handle all the data input from various law enforcement agencies and courts, and it could integrate any number of databases simultaneously, regardless of their computer languages or operating systems. When you think about all the ways the NSA spies on us now, as revealed by Edward Snowden—this is where that shit got started.

“A former NSA analyst *owns* Inslaw, as a matter of fact. His name is William Hamilton. A lot of the early work on PROMIS was done with government funds, so older versions of PROMIS were in the public domain and the Department of Justice was already using those versions. But in 1978, Inslaw was granted exclusive copyrights to all future versions of the software. When they came out with a privately funded 32-bit version called Enhanced PROMIS in 1982, the Department of Justice awarded Inslaw a ten million dollar contract to get the program up and running in over twenty of the largest U.S. Attorneys offices nationwide. But after that new software had been installed, the Department of Justice refused to pay up. Instead, they deliberately tried to force Inslaw into bankruptcy.”

“Does the DOJ really do stuff like that?” I ask.

“That’s kind of like asking if the CIA dabbles in international drug trafficking. They *shouldn’t* be doing it, but in actual fact, they do it all the time. Bad people will get up to bad shit—especially when there’s no one around to stop them. And if the Department of Justice is corrupt... well, is it any wonder that no Wall Street bankers went to jail for their roles in the 2008

financial crisis, even though it's been proven beyond any doubt that their criminality was rampant?"

"I guess not," I say—disgusted, as usual, by how screwed-up things have gotten in our federal government. *Anyone who can be bought has been bought.* I look out the windshield at scenic New Jersey again. As we pass a vulva-pink cinderblock strip club called the Vamps Lodge, I think out loud: "We pay our taxes and all we get for it is an endlessly expensive star chamber kangaroo court system that only pretends to dole out justice, while secretly holding justice-seekers in contempt."

What I choose *not* to mention is how that strip club we just passed has reminded me of Pam and her determination to pay for her Cal Arts degree without succumbing to the usual financial entrapment that most colleges are pushing these days, with their sky-high tuition rates and six-figure student loan programs. "Better a temporary stripper than a debt serf faced with a lifetime of shit-eating servitude," she said to me once—although not everyone would agree with that adage, of course. A lot of those same moralizing old prudes would have denied Pam a college education. But screw them. If the only people who can afford higher education without taking on stultifying amounts of debt are those who were born rich—rather than those who were born with intelligence to spare, like Pam—then our society is going to end up being run by a bunch of spoiled, selfish, braindead barbarians.

Some would say we're already there.

Crash, meanwhile, is still on the Department of Justice track: "There's definitely something rotten in the U.S. justice system," he says. "The Supreme Court even had the gall to put Bush the Younger in office when he had the minority of the popular vote and Jeb Bush's cronies were up to some obvious Republicans Gone Wild dirty tricks down in Florida. You can't get any more partisan and fucked-up than that."

"No, you can't..." I concur.

"The Inslaw Affair, as people started calling it, led to three separate trials in federal bankruptcy courts and two congressional hearings. In the first two trials, the courts ruled that the Justice

Department ‘took, converted, and stole’ Enhanced PROMIS through ‘trickery, fraud, and deceit,’ and then unlawfully attempted to force Inslaw into Chapter 7 liquidation so it wouldn’t be able to seek restitution through the courts. Inslaw was awarded an eight million dollar judgment. But when the Department of Justice heard that ruling, it just said ‘Fuck that noise...’ and kept filing appeals and dismissing impartial judges until, *finally*—over ten years later, in 1994—Attorney General Janet Reno got up in front of the cameras and announced that Department of Justice officials had thoroughly investigated themselves and arrived at the conclusion that they’d never stolen any software that wasn’t theirs to steal in the first place—and Inslaw could go suck the Deep State’s dick.”

“Not in those exact words, of course.”

“No, not in those exact words—but *close*,” Crash says. “Essentially, the DOJ just went ahead and exonerated itself of any wrongdoing, in direct contradiction to the findings of two federal courts and congressional committees. Ron Rosenbaum, writing about it for *Vanity Fair*, said something like: ‘If they ever make a movie about the Inslaw Affair, it could be called *Mr. and Mrs. Smith Go to Washington and Meet Franz Kafka*.’

“But that’s getting ahead of the story. Back in 1990, when Danny Casolaro started looking into the Inslaw Affair, the trials were still ongoing. He got in touch with Inslaw’s owners—William Hamilton, and his wife, Nancy—and started doing some research for them: following up on leads, interviewing witnesses, stuff like that. And that’s how Danny got introduced to Michael Riconosciuto—who, in turn, introduced Danny to the Octopus.”

“Michael *Who?*” I’m not sure I heard the name right with all the wind and freeway noise blustering around outside the Volvo.

“*Re-con-o-shoot-o*,” Crash pronounces for me, slowly. “But maybe we should just call him ‘Danger Man’—because that’s what Danny ended up calling him. Here’s where things start getting weird. Even now, after all the reading I’ve done on the subject, I’m still not sure if Michael Riconosciuto is a pathological liar, a disinformation agent, or the real deal. The

stories he told Danny were so outrageous that at first I thought: *There's no way this stuff could be true*. But then, when Danny and other investigators followed up on Riconosciuto's claims, they always turned out to be rooted in facts—really strange and appalling facts about how the Deep State operates.”

“Sounds like Lloyd,” I say, referring to the uncle of Crash’s old housemate and former best friend, James Marrsden—a best-selling author of humorous horror novels. Lloyd Marrsden (James’ uncle) was an obscenely rich and enormously fat insurance broker to the rocket industry who functioned in my *Crash Gordon* novels—and also, perhaps, in real life—as a “super-secret black-ops bagman for the medico-military-intelligence complex.” On the one occasion that I met Lloyd before he died in 1990 during a Coast Guard Intelligence operation in Big Sur, I was impressed by both his incredible bulk and his in-depth knowledge of the covert intelligence operations known as Operation Gladio and Gladio B. I was only eleven years old at the time, so most of what Lloyd had to say went right over my head, but I’ve had plenty of time to research it since. I ended up writing about that meeting in *Crash Gordon and the Revelations from Big Sur*.

Operation Gladio is the blanket term for the Deep State “stay-behind” armies that have existed in Europe since World War II. They started out as anti-communist guerilla forces, secretly organized and financed by the CIA and MI6. But the North Atlantic Treaty Organization controls them now and their mission has changed somewhat. Back in the mid-1960s, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, General Lyman Lemnitzer (of Operation Northwoods* fame), decided to transform the Gladio

* As Lloyd explained it to me, Lyman Lemnitzer’s Operation Northwoods was perhaps the most morally reprehensible undercover operation ever devised by the U.S. government (pre-November 22nd, 1963, at least...). On March 13th, 1962, Lemnitzer—then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—submitted to Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, a top-secret collection of draft memoranda now known as the Operation Northwoods proposals (declassified in 1997). Those proposals called for U.S. government operatives to commit a series of false flag terrorism events against American civilians that would then be blamed on Fidel Castro with phony evidence. The idea was to use a Strategy of Tension—or *strategia della tensione*, as the Italians call it—to generate public support for a full-scale invasion of Cuba.

units into a terrorist network that would prod Europeans toward an increasingly crypto-fascist form of government by deploying a “strategy of tension” (which is just a polite term for Operation Northwoods-style false flag terrorism and assassinations).

Here’s how that strategy of tension might work: Let’s say some Gladio agents plant a bomb at a railway station in London, Madrid, or Bologna. After the bomb goes off and kills a bunch of people, the Deep State’s minions in the mainstream media blame the event on some pre-designated group of “terrorists” like, say, the Red Brigades, Al Qaeda, Chechen rebels, or the current favorite, ISIS. In the ensuing media frenzy, the nation’s citizens become so frightened by hyped-up threats of more terrorism that they start voting for crypto-fascist politicians who promise to kick some serious terrorist ass. The newly elected crypto-fascists then proceed to pass legislation that progressively strips away the

“How was that supposed to work?” my eleven-year-old self asked Lloyd.

Lloyd started ticking off the Operation Northwoods proposals on his fat fingers: “First, they wanted to blow up a U.S. ship and her crew in Guantánamo Bay as a sort of psychopathic homage to the sinking of the USS *Maine*, which had been used by the Hearst media empire to incite the Spanish-American War back in 1898....

“Then they wanted to hijack an American passenger plane out of Miami using a special forces team disguised as Cuban agents, with the idea that they would later switch out the hijacked plane below radar with a copycat drone, which would then crash into the ocean somewhere near Cuba, purportedly killing all passengers aboard (although no mention was made as to how all those kidnapped passengers would be prevented from talking about their ordeal if they were, indeed, not intended to be sacrificed)....

“Alternatively, the Joint Chiefs suggested using prefabricated copies of Communist Cuban MiGs to shoot down a commercial airliner flying over Cuban airspace en route to Jamaica, Panama, or Venezuela—or to make an unprovoked attack on a U.S. Air Force jet flying over international waters....

“They also wanted to sink boatloads full of refugees fleeing Cuba, or blow them up using plastic explosives on the streets of Miami and even Washington, D.C.—again, with false Cuban agents assigned the blame.”

And so on... you get the idea. President Kennedy had the good sense to shoot down the Operation Northwoods proposals—but then, of course, *he* got shot down in Dallas some twenty months later.

rights and wealth of law-abiding citizens while increasing the powers of the Deep State. Some time is allowed to pass and then the New and Improved Deep State instructs Operation Gladio to rinse and repeat in a vicious cycle that, like Crash says, makes the Deep State what we're all soaking in.

Gladio B is responsible for that same strategy of tension being applied in the United States. The 9/11 attacks and the immediate passage into law of the pre-written USA PATRIOT Act would be the prime example, of course. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing might come in as a distant second. Lloyd had told us back in 1990 that something like Oklahoma City or 9/11 would be happening. He thought it was inevitable.

And as it turned out, he was right.

"I'm sure Lloyd knew *all about* Michael Riconosciuto," Crash says. "He's just the sort of guy Lloyd would have taken an interest in. Danny went and talked to him about the Inslaw Affair because Riconosciuto had called the Hamiltons in May of 1990 and told them that their PROMIS software was connected to Reagan's October Surprise."

"Wait, *what?* How?"

"According to Riconosciuto, he'd traveled to Iran in 1980 with a guy named Earl Brian to give Iranian officials in Tehran forty million dollars in exchange for their assurance that Iran wouldn't release their fifty-two American hostages until after the U.S. elections, so President Carter's re-election campaign wouldn't get a last-minute boost at the polls and Reagan would get elected. That's exactly what happened, of course. As a reward for this black-ops bagman service—just one part of the Reagan/Bush team's arms-for-hostages deal—a U.S. Department of Justice official named Peter Videnieks allegedly gave Earl Brian a copy of Enhanced PROMIS and told him he could sell it to governments, banks, and intelligence agencies throughout the world—and keep the profits. We're talking about tens of millions of dollars here. Maybe more."

"Sounds like bullshit," I say.

“That’s what Danny thought. But Riconosciuto was willing to sign an affidavit stating that while he was working as Director of Research for Wackenhut on the Cabazon Mission Indian reservation near Indio, California, he’d been asked to modify the 1982 Enhanced PROMIS software by Dr. Earl Winfrey Brian—a former combat surgeon in the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War who’d become a ‘private businessman’ with ‘close ties to the U.S. intelligence community.’ Brian had also been a member of Ronald Reagan’s ‘kitchen cabinet’ back when Reagan was California’s governor. And he was a close friend of Edwin Meese, President Reagan’s Counselor and later, Attorney General, while most of this stuff was going down.”

“Wait a sec...” I interrupt. “What’s Wackenhut? And what does it have to do with Indians? I’m getting lost here.”

“Wackenhut is what got me started on this whole weird tangent with the Octopus,” says Crash. “It’s a lot like Kroll, the company that was spying on you. It was founded by George Wackenhut and three other partners—all former FBI agents—back in 1954. By 1966, Wackenhut had secret files on over four million ‘suspected dissidents’ in America—or about one in every thirty American adults then living.

“Like Kroll, Wackenhut has always had a lot of former FBI, NSA, NSC, DEA, and CIA agents on its payroll. Whenever the CIA needs cover, Wackenhut is willing to provide it. Reagan’s CIA Director, William Casey, even used to be their outside legal counsel. And their board of directors reads like a Who’s Who in the Spook World: ex-Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner; ex-CIA deputy director, Frank Carlucci; ex-FBI director, Clarence Kelly; ex-Secret Service director, James Rowley... the list goes on and on. Kroll’s board of directors is just as star-studded with ex-intelligence agents—it’s been called ‘the CIA of Wall Street.’ The only real difference between the two companies is that Kroll specializes in corporate investigations and independent risk consulting, while Wackenhut leans more toward armed security guard services. So really, it falls somewhere between Kroll and Blackwater—or whatever Blackwater’s calling itself these days... Xe, or *Academi*, I think.”

"I guess once a name gets a bad rap in the security business, they just change it to something else, huh?"

"Yeah, it's an easy way to throw people off their trail in the Internet Age. Wackenhut's name has changed, too. It's now known as G4S Secure Solutions. Among other things, it was the second-largest for-profit prison operator in the U.S. until Wackenhut Corrections split-off from it and became the GEO Group in 2003. Now the GEO Group is running neck-and-neck with Corrections Corporation of America in the race to become the biggest for-profit prison operator on the planet."

"Those fucking for-profit prison planet owners... I was talking to Conye about those guys the other night."

"I know. I was there, remember?"

"Oh, yeah..." I say, a little embarrassed. "So, *uhm*, you still haven't told me what Wackenhut was doing on an Indian reservation. With a goofy name like that, I thought they might've been a hipster teepee manufacturer."

"I wish..." says Crash. "What you have to understand is that the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians is a sovereign nation—even though there's only about thirty of them still living around Indio in the Coachella Valley. But that's enough for their reservation to have sovereign immunity, which allowed Wackenhut to conduct business there that would have been subject to federal oversight off the reservation. So the short answer is that Wackenhut was there from 1981 to 1984 to produce weapons—bombs, poison gas, biological warfare agents, cheap rifles, night-vision goggles, and so on. They were using the reservation to sneak around congressional prohibitions, like the Boland Amendment, aimed at prohibiting the shipment of U.S. arms to the Contras in Nicaragua during that whole Iran-Contra fiasco. But there was more to it than that, of course."

"Of course," I say, feeling like my head is about to explode.

"This is where Gerald Bull comes in," Crash tells me. "He was the weapons genius behind a company called Space Research Corporation. Riconosciuto claimed he'd worked with Gerry Bull

to develop easily miniaturized ‘enhanced fuel-air explosives’ that nearly matched the explosive yields of suitcase nukes without all the clingy radiation residue—sort of like a dish soap that’s tough on grease, but soft on hands. One of their early prototypes sank the ground level at a Nevada test site by 30 feet when it blew.”

“Oh great... just what we need—more ways to kill people,” I say, heavy on the sarcasm.

“They’re also known as barometric bombs. Riconosciuto’s nickname for them is *Blue Lightning*. According to him, these new weapons make use of Thomas Townsend Brown’s suppressed work in ‘electrogravitics’ to polarize the molecules in a gas cloud by modifying their electrical field. As I understand it, a small initial explosion—or a manufactured weather event, like chemtrail spraying—distributes a cloud of chemical fuel into the air. The cloud then gets charged with electrostatic energy by launching a ‘wire’ through it (sort of like a bottle-rocket), which then somehow produces a second, hugely destructive ‘magnetic electrogravitic nuclear reaction’ that can turn entire buildings to dust.

“This is all based on work that Riconosciuto pioneered at the Hercules Research Corporation in Hercules, California. He and his father, Marshall, were partners in that corporation, along with their close family friend, Pat Moriarty—the Red Devil Fireworks magnate and Nixon crony. Moriarty also happened to be the founder of the Bank of Irvine—a bank that rather spectacularly failed in 1984 due to deliberate fraud and mismanagement. Moriarty pled guilty to charges of mail fraud in a court case that became California’s biggest political scandal in over thirty years. At least ten prominent politicians were indicted for taking bribes from him.”

“So we have another big winner in the Scuzzball Sweepstakes!”

“Exactly. After the Blue Lightning bomb project was finished and handed off to Wackenhut, Gerry Bull jetted off to Iraq to design and build Saddam Hussein’s 500-foot-long, 2,100-ton ‘supergun.’ He also helped Saddam solve some issues with the nose cones on Iraq’s shiny new SCUD missiles. The American military-industrial-intelligence complex had no problem with

Bull offering his assistance to Iraq at the time because Saddam was a CIA-controlled puppet-dictator and Donald Rumsfeld's great pal. Such a great pal, in fact, that Saddam was given a few Blue Lightning bombs and some chemical weapons for his personal arsenal as a sort of goodwill gesture from Rumsfeld. Saddam used them to fry some Kurds during the al-Anfal Campaign in 1988. The Israelis weren't too happy about that, so they reportedly sent some Mossad agents to Brussels to assassinate Gerry Bull on his doorstep in 1990."

"Jesus," I say, a little overwhelmed by all the intrigue.

"That's not the half of it," says Crash. "Remember Riconosciuto's affidavit stating that he'd modified the PROMIS software at the request of Earl Brian while he was working on the Wackenhut/Cabazon Joint Venture? Well, a week after he signed that affidavit and his lawyer handed it over to the U.S. Department of Justice, Michael Riconosciuto was arrested. He was accused of running a meth lab in his home state of Washington. Riconosciuto insisted that he'd been set up, and the so-called 'meth lab' was in reality a hydrodynamic platinum refining operation that used Townsend Brown technology. Unfortunately, the platinum refining process required a lot of the same precursor chemicals that are used to make methamphetamine—although a soil sample analysis conducted by U.S. government officials failed to turn up any drug contamination at Riconosciuto's 'meth lab.' That analysis *did*, however, find a high concentration of barium in the soil, which is often found in the sort of high-voltage work that Riconosciuto claimed to be conducting there. He got thirty years, anyway.

"The real reason the Department of Justice came down so hard on him, according to Riconosciuto, was because he'd built a back door into the PROMIS software that was being used by U.S. intelligence agencies to spy on foreign governments, international banks, and law enforcement agencies around the world. Dr. Earl Brian was the Johnny Appleseed of PROMIS, spreading it far and wide and raking in the profits—with the full knowledge and tacit approval of the U.S. Department of Justice. He made so much money that he ended up owning United Press

International and the Financial News Network—where I’m sure he disseminated all kinds of Operation Mockingbird-style lies and propaganda. Then he was convicted in 1989 of falsifying his companies’ finances to obtain fifty-six million dollars in bank loans. He got four years in prison for that, between 1998 and 2002.

“I have no idea where Earl Brian is now, but you can bet he’s not hurting for money. He was using the profits from his illegal sales of PROMIS to invest into biotechnology and biological warfare companies like Bio-Rad Laboratories in Hercules, California, just ten miles north of Berkeley. According to Riconosciuto—who should know, since it’s on the same property as his family’s business, Hercules Research—Bio-Rad makes ‘the most toxic biological and radioactive compounds known to man,’ including gene-specific cytotoxins (or ‘ethno-specific’ bacteriological weapons), which he described as ‘Hitler’s wet dream’—capable of wiping out ‘whole segments of humanity.’ So Earl Brian has that to fall back on, if nothing else.”

“He sounds like quite the go-getter.”

“He was. Or *is*... he’s still alive, so far as I know. I’ve seen estimates suggesting that more than 80 countries were using modified versions of PROMIS, thanks to Earl Brian. That includes the drug enforcement agencies in such political hot spots as Syria, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Cyprus. Which is important, because Michael Riconosciuto was a self-proclaimed expert at laundering money from drug trafficking and arms deals. That’s why he went to Iraq in 1980 with forty million dollars. That’s also why his modified PROMIS software ended up being used to track, steal, and launder money at Octopus-controlled banks like the Bank of Irving, Silverado Savings and Loan, BCCI, ICIC, Nugan Hand Bank in Australia, and Paul Helliwell’s Castle Bank in the Bahamas.”

“There was one big problem, though: Riconosciuto’s modified PROMIS software continued to get modified by other software companies. It started going by different names (FOIMS, ECHELON, COINS, and the enterprise architecture software developed by PTech for the U.S. Treasury Department, HUD,

the IRS, the Department of Defense, and the FAA, etcetera), but the underlying PROMIS source code, with its built-in back door, was always there, deep in the guts of that other software. It was being used to track classified information—and to do surveillance and intervention—in the computer networks of the CIA and the FBI. It was also being used by MI6 in the U.K., by the Mossad in Israel, and by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in—

“—let me guess... Canada?”

“Right. And Riconosciuto wasn’t the only computer genius in the world. According to a deep undercover investigator for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police named Sean McDade—who was conducting a probe into the Inslaw case in America, code-named Project Abbreviation—his sources told him that the Mossad had discovered the PROMIS back door and modified it into a ‘two-way’ back door, which then allowed the Israelis to spy on the U.S. intelligence network. Then things got *really* out of control when a former FBI agent named Robert P. Hannsen stole that compromised ‘two-way’ version of PROMIS and sold it to the Russians for two million dollars. The Russians then sold it on the black market to Osama bin Laden, who used it to penetrate classified computer files before the 9/11 attacks, allowing him to evade detection and monitor U.S. investigations into Al Qaeda, so he was always one step ahead of the people trying to track him down.”

All I can say to that is: “What a clusterfuck.”

“You’re not kidding. McDade’s sources also hinted that the Israelis had used PROMIS to tap into the research going on at Los Alamos and other installations, so they now have all our latest and greatest nuclear weapons secrets.”

“No wonder those chest-thumping Zionists are so good at making bombs these days,” I say.

“They like to call it the Samson Option,” says Crash. “In the event of a second Holocaust—or some military flare-up that seems to portend that outcome—Israel will retaliate by taking out the whole world with a nuclear winter before it goes down.”

“Speaking of bombs... Michael Riconosciuto was convinced that one of his Blue Lightning bombs had been used at the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Witnesses said they heard two explosions when the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was destroyed. Seismic experts confirmed those reports. The time between the two seismic events fit within the parameters of a barometric bomb’s two-stage explosion signature. Riconosciuto said that the fertilizer bomb in back of Timothy McVeigh’s Ryder truck had nowhere near the explosive force necessary to do the damage that the Murrah building sustained; it was simply a cover. McVeigh was the patsy for his Deep State handlers. Traces of tritium were also found in the building’s wreckage—and that’s what Riconosciuto says his Blue Lightning bombs leave behind after they go off—*tritium*.”

“Man, what *is it* with this guy? He’s like the Forrest Gump of the Deep State,” I say. “First he pays off the Ayatollah for Reagan. Then he codes back doors into the software that everybody uses to spy on everybody else. And then, *in his spare time*, he invents a barometric bomb that was used at Oklahoma City? The guy’s either a liar, or a fucking genius.”

Crash says, “He definitely has some evil genius characteristics. People have called him the Lex Luthor of Washington State—although Jeb Bezos might be more deserving of that title.”

“Jeb Bezos isn’t running drugs, laundering money, and inventing rad new bombs to blow up federal buildings. So unless Bezos was the mastermind behind 9/11, Riconosciuto gets my vote.”

“I’ve seen videos on UTube where Riconosciuto claims that modified versions of his barometric bombs were probably used to take down the World Trade Center towers, too—so I guess he wins—even though he had his attorney send a certified letter to Colin Powell warning him that 9/11 was coming a full seven months before it happened. But don’t underestimate Jeb Bezos. Glamazon Web Services handles all the cloud-data for the CIA now, so in a sense, he’s taken over from where PROMIS left off. You don’t think the CIA’s gone clean all of a sudden, do you?”

“I don’t think that’s even possible at this point.”

"I don't, either," says Crash. "So just imagine what you could do if you had PROMIS-like access to the CIA's cloud-data. No wonder Glamazon's stock price keeps going up and up, even though they've only lost money for the past twenty years."

"Wait... *back up*. Did you just say Colin Powell got a letter from Riconosciuto warning him about the 9/11 attacks?"

"I did. It happened. You can look it up. See, that's the thing about Riconosciuto... he tells people these things that sound way too out-there to be believed, but then it turns out he was telling the truth all along. If he's a disinfo agent—which is entirely possible—then he's fucking brilliant at it."

"A disinfo agent who tells the truth... what's that about?"

"From what I've read—and I don't know whether to believe this or not—there are two warring factions in the U.S. intelligence community. One group is supposed to be centered in the CIA around a core of heavy-hitters known as MJ-12. The other group, COM-12, is centered in Naval intelligence—specifically, ONI and CGI... Lloyd's old pals. The story goes that COM-12 is trying to preserve democracy and America's constitutional government by deliberately leaking information about the crypto-fascist machinations of MJ-12."

"So MJ-12 is the head of the Octopus. And Riconosciuto used to work for them, but now he's working for COM-12."

"That's one possible interpretation. But Danny Casolaro seemed to believe that a cabal of corrupt judges and lawyers within the U.S. Department of Justice was the head of the Octopus. And there's evidence that his pursuit of that line of reasoning is what got him killed."

Fully aware that I might be going off on a weird tangent, I say, "Didn't MJ-12 have something to do with aliens? I remember reading something somewhere about MJ-12... or the *Majestic* 12 documents. Ever heard of 'em?"

"Whitley Strieber wrote a book about that called *Majestic*, which he tried to pass off as a true story. But you can't trust Whitley... he's a pathological weirdo."

“Decent writer, though.”

“Sure. But you have to at least consider the possibility that this whole UFO / little-gray-aliens-pronged-my-bunghole thing might be a long-running deception... a military-intelligence complex hoax to provide cover for black budget projects like the U-2 spy plane, the Stealth Bomber, and other things we don’t even know about.”

“So you’re saying Whitley didn’t *really* get ass-raped by a bunch of spindly grey alien dudes?”

“If that’s what he believes, well, more power to him. But there’s a tentacle on the Octopus that can give you some insight into how an alien smokescreen or UFO hoax might work—and again, Riconosciuto is connected to it.”

“*Of course!* Why wouldn’t he be?”

“He grew up in Tacoma, Washington—Home of the Maury Island Incident. Ever heard of it?”

“Sure. It was the first UFO sighting that had Men in Black show up to tell people not to talk about it. How did Riconosciuto get involved with it? Was he even born then? That was back in the forties, I thought.”

“June 21st, 1947, to be exact. Allegedly three days before Kenneth Arnold’s more famous sighting of the nine ‘flying saucers’ zooming around Mt. Rainier. I say ‘allegedly’ because a lot of people insist it never really happened.”

“I didn’t know it was *before* Kenneth Arnold. I guess you’ll have to refresh my memory.”

“Okay, so here’s the story: A guy named Harold Dahl, in Tacoma, owned a Navy surplus boat—a repurposed mine-sweeper, I think. He was using it to scrounge for floating logs in Puget Sound. I guess there was some money to be made by selling the logs back to the lumber mills around there, but it wasn’t much—maybe twenty or thirty bucks per log. Then again, diesel fuel was cheap in those days and you could buy a brand-new Buick for around two thousand bucks, so maybe he was doing all right for himself.

“Anyway, one day Harold was out there in his boat with a crew of two other guys. He also had his son and his dog with him. They were cruising around Maury Island when they looked up and saw six doughnut-shaped UFOs floating above them, about 2,000 feet up. Each UFO was about 100 feet across with a 25-foot hole in the center. Dahl said they were metallic gold and ringed with black portholes.

“One of the UFOs looked like it was in trouble. It was wobbling and losing altitude. The other five UFOs followed it down, like they were trying to help it stay aloft. Then, when the UFOs were only about 500 feet above Dahl’s boat, the crippled UFO went haywire and started spewing out a cloud of white metal that looked like newspaper. It also started shitting out hot black slag that looked like lava rocks. The slag hit the water steaming and started pummeling Dahl’s boat. Before anyone could dive for cover, it burned his son’s arm and killed his dog.”

“So the first modern UFO casualty was this guy’s dog?”

“Yeah—if you can believe Harold Dahl.”

“What breed?”

“What?”

“What kind of dog was it?”

“How the hell should I know? *Why?* Is it important?”

“Well, we’re on our way to pick up an Amish Goldendoodle right now, and I just thought it’d be cool to know more about the first dog that got snuffed by a UFO. Maybe they could make a statue of it, like Balto, and put it up on Maury Island.”

“Maybe you should bring that up with the Tacoma City Council.”

“Maybe I will,” I say.

“I’m sure they’d love to see you christen it at the opening ceremony, like you did for Balto.”

I have to laugh at that, even though it stings a little.

“Okay, fuck you...” I say. “Tell me the rest of the story.”

THE OCTOPUS AND AMISH PUPS, PART II

Crash continues his narration: “So after the wobbly UFO crapped out its mess of hot black slag all over Harold Dahl’s boat, it seemed to be fine. Just a ufological case of Montezuma’s Revenge, I suppose. The six UFOs regained altitude and took off, out of sight. Dahl patched up his kid’s arm, tossed the dead dog overboard, and went back home. The next day, he reported the incident to his ‘superior’—as Dahl called him—probably a silent partner who co-owned the boat with him, although no one can say for sure. What we *do* know is that the superior’s name was Fred Lee Crisman.

“After examining the boat, Crisman thought his buddy Harold might’ve been hosting a drunken boat barbeque party that got a little out of control, but he decided to do some investigating, anyway. So he went out to Maury Island later that same day. He found some weird metallic debris there—about ‘twenty tons’ of it, he guessed. It seemed to confirm Dahl’s story. And then Crisman had *his own* UFO sighting. Another doughnut-shaped UFO showed up right there above the island and ascended into a thundercloud—or so he claimed. Crisman was alone, so there weren’t any witnesses to confirm it.”

The name sounds familiar to me. “*Crisman...*” I say. “Where have I heard that before?”

“Probably from Jim Garrison’s investigation into Kennedy’s assassination,” Crash tells me. “You know—the one that Oliver Stone’s *JFK* movie was based on?”

“I know the movie,” I say. “I just don’t remember seeing any guy named Crisman in it.”

“He wasn’t. But Jim Garrison had identified Fred Crisman as one of the ‘three tramps’ arrested at the railway yard adjacent to the grassy knoll, where twenty-one police officers went running because they’d heard a shot coming from that direction—the second, fatal shot that blew out Kennedy’s brains.”

“Hold on. You’re not saying that Crisman—”

Crash nods his head. “Jim Garrison was convinced that Crisman was one of JFK’s assassins, working on behalf of the military-industrial-intelligence complex—specifically, for Boeing in Seattle. But he didn’t have enough evidence to make it stick, so he went after Clay Shaw instead. Garrison subpoenaed Crisman and paid him five hundred dollars to fly down to New Orleans to spill what he knew about Clay Shaw, David Ferrie, and Guy Banister. Somehow, he was mixed up with all three of them.”

“How?”

“Someone told Garrison that Crisman was the first person Clay Shaw called after he found out the New Orleans district attorney’s office was after him. Crisman and David Ferrie were both ‘wandering bishops’—ordained by some weird-ass churches that were thought to be CIA fronts. I can’t remember the specifics right now, but you can read about it in Peter Levenda’s *Sinister Forces* trilogy, if you’re interested. Crisman had been flying down from Seattle to New Orleans on a regular basis in the early 1960s and was seen visiting the Cuban Revolutionary Council, founded by E. Howard Hunt—who, like Crisman, was suspected of being one of the ‘three tramps.’”

“E. Howard Hunt—the Watergate burglar guy?”

“The same. Hunt later made a deathbed confession to his sons, telling them he’d been involved in JFK’s assassination.

Hunt's anti-Castro Cuban Revolutionary Council had the same address that was printed on the pro-Castro 'Fair Play for Cuba Committee' flyers that Lee Harvey Oswald had been handing out to people on the streets in New Orleans. It was also the address on the building that housed Guy Banister's private detective agency. Banister's wife said she found some of those old Fair Play for Cuba flyers in her husband's office after he died."

Crash goes on to explain that Guy Banister was a former FBI agent who'd been assigned to the Butte, Montana field office in the late-1940s. The Montana FBI also covered Idaho and parts of eastern Washington at the time. Back then, the FBI actually *cared* about UFOs, and Banister had been sent out to investigate the huge wave of UFO sightings in the area that had begun in 1947. Whenever Banister filed a new UFO report (and there were a lot of them), the files were always marked with the designation *Security Matter-X*, which is probably where the TV show title *The X-Files* originated—thus qualifying Guy Banister as a real-life Fox Mulder.

"So at least two of the suspects in the Kennedy assassination were connected to the first modern UFO sightings? Do you have any idea how weird that sounds?" I ask Crash.

"It gets weirder," he assures me. "Jim Garrison was working for the FBI in the Seattle-Tacoma area in 1947. Before the trial, he and Guy Banister had lunch together and swapped stories about their early years in the intelligence field. There's no record of them ever discussing the Maury Island Incident, but it's almost a sure bet they both knew about it, even if they hadn't been sent out to investigate it."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I kid you not. There's more... according to *The Torbitt Document*, Fred Lee Crisman had used the alias John Howard Bowen to travel with Lee Harvey Oswald to a secret school for assassins down in Mexico. And you'll love this: Crisman was also in the advertising business with Marshall Riconosciuto—Michael's father. Michael Riconosciuto has said that Fred Crisman was like an uncle to him while he was growing up."

“Oh man, this is just getting way too unbelievable! But then, on another level, it makes perfect sense: How else could Riconosciuto be involved in so much Deep State shit, unless he was born into it? It’s like the Tacoma trailer trash version of the Bush family.”

“That depends on what you mean by trailer trash,” Crash says. “Michael Riconosciuto has a genius-level IQ, unlike all those C-minus students from the Bush family.”

“He’s a genius *liar*, you mean.”

“No—he was a bona fide boy genius. Danny Casolaro did some journalistic digging and found out that by the time Michael Riconosciuto was ten years old, in 1958, he’d wired up his parents’ neighborhood with a private telephone service. In the eighth grade, he won his first science fair with a model for a three-dimensional sonar system. He went on to win so many other awards for his science fair exhibits of laser technology that he was invited to work as a summer research assistant at Stanford University with the Nobel laureate, Doctor Arthur Schawlow, who definitely remembered him. ‘You don’t forget a 16-year-old youngster who shows up with his own argon laser,’ Doctor Schawlow told Danny during an interview.”

“I had one of those on my Schwinn when I was twelve,” I mock-brag. “Remember that? Ape hanger handlebars, a green metal flake banana seat, and an argon laser mounted right next to my chrome speedometer from Western Auto—so I could zap fiery holes in the hearts of my enemies. They called me the Green Horndog.”

“Yeah, right...” Crash drawls. “Compared to you, Michael Riconosciuto was a late-bloomer. But by the time he was in his early twenties, he was running around Tacoma with Fred Crisman, helping him bug offices to eavesdrop on local politicians. That was right around the time of the Jim Garrison trial. Crisman was working as a talk show host by then—sort of the Rush Limbaugh of the Pacific Northwest—ranting on the radio behind the pseudonym ‘Doctor Jon Gold.’ But that came way after the Maury Island Incident.”

“Yeah, let’s get back to that...” I say, ufology being high on my list of favorite disreputable topics. “When did the Men in Black show up?”

“The morning after Harold Dahl saw his UFOs, if I’m not mistaken. A strange man in a black suit showed up at Dahl’s house unannounced, driving a brand-new black Buick. He wanted to have breakfast. Dahl thought the guy might be interested in buying some salvaged logs, so he went with him to a nearby café. But the Man in Black wasn’t interested in logs. He told Dahl that he knew exactly what had happened at Maury Island. He described it all in incredible detail. And then he said if Dahl kept talking about it, the consequences would be dire.”

“Typical. Those guys are always making threats, like they control the fucking universe.”

“Yeah, but Dahl couldn’t exactly look up Men in Black on Wikipedia—remember? This was the very first Man in Black encounter. So Dahl did pretty much what anyone else would’ve done in that situation: he blew off the Man in Black and kept telling people about his weird UFO experience. And very quickly, his life turned to shit.”

“What happened? I can’t remember.”

“First, he lost a bunch of salvaged logs that he’d been piling up to take back to the timber companies—about three thousand dollars’ worth. Dahl thought they might’ve been washed out with the tide. But then his wife got sick and his son went missing.”

“The son with the burnt up arm from flying doughnut slag?”

“That’s the one: *Charles*. The local sheriff’s office managed to track him down about a week later. They found fifteen-year-old Charles Dahl bussing tables at a restaurant in Lust, Montana—or Lusk, Wyoming. Accounts vary. But the whole episode definitely had that weird aura of Men in Black menace about it. The kid had amnesia. He had no idea how he’d ended up there.”

“Just like you in Big Sur.”

“Yeah, but at least *my* amnesia could be attributed to the fact that I was in a car that got pushed over a cliff.”

“By *Men in Black*,” I remind him.

“According to Lloyd. But I *still* don’t remember seeing them do it. Like Charles Dahl, I woke up blank, like I’d been dumped straight out of a CIA mind control program.”

“Maybe you and Harold’s kid got hit with one of those nifty mind erasers, like Tommy Lee Jones carries around in the *Men in Black* movies.”

“That’s total disinfo and you know it.”

“Fun to watch, though.”

Crash nods, as if conceding that I might have a point. “This Maury Island thing got as weird as any movie,” he says. “So weird, in fact, that the editor of a pulp science fiction magazine latched onto it. The magazine was called *Amazing Stories*. Its editor was a short little hunchbacked guy named Ray Palmer, who Kenn Thomas has described as ‘a Stephen Hawking in reverse.’ The science fiction that Ray Palmer liked to publish tended to be pretty light on science: big-breasted alien babes, sperm-whale-munching slime gods, killer spiders from Mars... anyhow, you get the idea. When Ray Palmer heard about the Maury Island Incident, he called up Kenneth Arnold and offered him two hundred bucks to fly up to Tacoma to do a story on it.”

“Kenneth Arnold—the same guy who’d seen nine UFOs cruising around Mt. Rainier?”

“Same guy. It was kind of brilliant, from a publicity standpoint. But what Ray Palmer didn’t tell Kenneth Arnold was that one of the people he’d be interviewing—Fred Crisman—had already been writing for *Amazing Stories*.”

“Wait, don’t tell me... Crisman was the ‘Killer Spiders from Mars’ guy, right?”

“Close. Crisman had been writing letters to *Amazing Stories* that claimed he’d gotten into submachine gun battles with albino mutants inhabiting underground caverns in Burma and Alaska.”

“No way!”

“I know: it sounds nuts. But *Amazing Stories* had recently doubled its readership by publishing a series of stories by Richard Sharpe Shaver about a race of cave-dwelling degenerates known as the *Deros*—which was his shorthand term for ‘detrimental robots.’”

“Sounds like they should’ve been a New Wave band, like Devo.”

“The Deros weren’t really robots, according to Shaver,” Crash elucidates. “They’re more like Whitley Strieber’s aliens. They just act robotic because their bodies can’t handle the ‘detrimental radiation’ of the sun, so they have to live underground, where they’ve been going a little crazy. They used to be super-advanced space travelers, but now they’re stranded here and they’ve devolved into maggoty little tyrants and sadists. They get off on terrorizing people on the planet’s surface with earthquakes and *Ray technology* that can manipulate the minds of men.”

“I hate those Deros Rays,” I say, just to be saying something. “They mess with my dopamine receptors, making me feel super-depressed and horny, all at once.”

“That’s also known as extended adolescence,” Crash informs me. “The Deros have that problem, too. Richard Shaver said that ever since the first Deros colonies were established here on Earth, back around the time of Atlantis, they’ve been using their Ray technology to preserve their flesh past its expiration date. But the Ray technology isn’t perfect—some physical and mental deterioration still occurs. At the same time, some of the sun’s ‘detrimental radiation’ still gets through to them underground. It can’t be avoided. So now, over the eons, most of the Deros have degenerated to the point where they look like the living dead. They even have to drink human blood to survive.”

“Sounds like the Archons,” I say. “Controlling the thoughts of our leaders, feeding off humanity, making things worse for us—just for the hell of it.”

“There are definite parallels,” Crash confirms, “although Shaver wasn’t a Gnostic and he didn’t believe he was in psychic contact with interdimensional entities. He was a hardcore materialist. He said his Deros knowledge came to him from voices he heard emanating from his welding gun—‘by some freak of its coil’s field attunements’—while he was working at a manufacturing plant in Barto, Pennsylvania. He insisted the stories were true, and Palmer was backing him up on that, despite the obvious indicators that Shaver might be a particularly imaginative paranoid schizophrenic. *Amazing Stories* called the series ‘The Shaver Mystery.’ Readers started writing in by the thousands to describe their own strange encounters with the Deros—it was like a *Penthouse Letters* forum for guys who’d scared the jizz out of themselves in caves—and Fred Crisman was one of them.”

“What was Crisman doing in Burma?”

“He was a captain in the Army Air Corp during World War II. He supposedly flew 211 combat missions as an Air Commando Group fighter pilot—and was shot down twice. When he bailed out over Burma and went missing for five days, Crisman claimed that he and a pal had ended up machine-gunning their way out of a cave while the Deros fired flesh-searing Rayguns at them.”

“Happens all the time, I’m sure.”

“No doubt,” says Crash, acknowledging my sarcasm, “but what’s interesting to me is that there’s a CIA file floating around out there on Crisman that Jim Garrison could have run across. It’s known as the ‘Easy Papers’—after the EASY 4250ece section of the CIA that’s mentioned in the report. It might be bogus, but the file contains records stating that the Office of Strategic Services recruited Fred Crisman in 1942 and trained him as a liaison officer. Then they put him in charge of establishing cooperation between the British Royal Air Force and the OSS 101 Detachment in the China-Burma-India Theater.

“What’s significant about that, of course, is that a lot of OSS recruits ended up working for the CIA—as Crisman did, starting

in 1947, according to the Easy Papers. And *Burma* is where the Chief of Special Intelligence for the OSS, Colonel Paul Helliwell, came up with the bright idea of trafficking drugs to finance the CIA/MI6 black-ops joint venture, Operation Gladio, back in Europe.”

“*Whoa, whoa, whoa...*” I say. “You’ll have to unpack that. Are you telling me Crisman flew drugs for the CIA?”

“It’s quite possible. Even likely,” Crash says. “Helliwell—”

“*Hell Is Well?*”

“Close enough, in this case. Colonel Helliwell was the principal architect of some of the CIA’s worst crimes against humanity, but you hardly ever hear about him.”

“I’ve *never* heard of him.”

“There’s a reason for that. His name has been scrubbed from the records of the National Security Archive. *Redacted*. If his schemes were widely known, the public would want to put the CIA out of business—‘splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it into the winds’—as JFK said after the botched Bay of Pigs invasion. That seems impossible at this point, but hey, at least the sentiment would be there.”

“I doubt it,” I say. “Most people are too busy paying off loans and bludgeoning each other with fake-happy, look-at-me shit on Facebook and Twitter to worry about what the CIA is doing these days.”

“That needs to change, or we’re all doomed.”

“It’s a Hell Is Well world out there, Crash. You basically said so yourself. So what’d this Helliwell character do, anyway?”

“Helliwell was in Burma providing covert assistance for General Chiang Kai-shek’s planned overthrow of Mao Zedong’s Communist Party of China. Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang Army, the KMT, sold Burmese opium to Chinese addicts whenever they needed money to buy supplies for their exiled troops. Helliwell zeroed in on that and thought, *Why not apply some American ingenuity to this operation and scale it up?*

“He passed the idea along to Wild Bill Donovan—the head of the OSS. Donovan talked it over with future CIA director Allen Dulles; his paranoid sidekick, James Jesus Angleton; and the suave, 007-like spymaster of British Security Coordination, Sir William Stephenson. Those guys all loved the idea. They thought Helliwell could be a big help to Operation Gladio, especially after he had a follow-up brainstorm and told them the CIA could make a fortune by selling Golden Triangle heroin to black communities in America’s inner cities.”

“So crack wasn’t the first drug the CIA sold in Harlem and Compton,” I say.

“Not by a long shot. Donovan, Angleton, and Dulles knew they needed a steady stream of revenue to maintain Gladio’s stay-behind units, like the ‘Werewolves’ in West Germany’s Gehlen Organization. Operation Gladio didn’t have congressional approval—or even a mandate from the Pentagon—and the Truman Administration hadn’t set aside any funds in the federal budget for covert postwar operations. The Rockefeller and Mellon foundations had put up an initial two hundred million dollars to get Gladio up and running, but that wasn’t going to last forever. So Donovan told Helliwell to get busy. And that’s how this whole malign, endless, Deep State drug-trafficking black-ops nightmare got started.”

“Paul Helliwell, huh?”

“He’s the man. Helliwell teamed up with E. Howard Hunt and Lieutenant General Claire Chennault to establish a Taiwan-based CIA front company called Civil Air Transport, which used surplus military aircraft to smuggle U.S. weapons to the KMT forces in Burma’s Shan Plateau. The empty planes were then loaded up with Burmese opium that was flown back to Taiwan and Bangkok for processing into heroin. Helliwell established a second CIA front company in Bangkok called the Sea Supply Corporation that did pretty much the same thing with seagoing vessels capable of transporting much larger cargo loads: huge shipments of U.S. arms in, and huge shipments of drugs out—eventually leading all the way back to America’s shores.”

“So, wait a sec... E. Howard Hunt was part of this Civil Air Transport scam? Did he and Fred Crisman know each other?”

“They might’ve met there. The dates line up. Crisman was recalled to active duty during the Korean War in 1950. He supposedly flew transport planes between Korea and Japan until 1953. Was he making side trips down to Burma as well? It’s possible. He got addicted to drugs during that time—we know that much, at least.”

“To heroin?”

“Barbiturates, for his anxiety attacks. Just so you know, Civil Air Transport later changed its name to Air America. It provided the air fleets that the CIA used to stay on top of the drug trade for the next twenty-five years. I’m assuming you know what they were up to during the war in Vietnam.”

“Of course! They made it into a Mel Gibson movie.”

“Kind of a limited hangout there... but better than nothing.”

“And Robert Downey Jr. is always fun to watch.”

“*A gifted actor...*” Crash says with self-mocking pomposity. “Helliwell, by the way, left for Miami in 1951, where he did double-duty as the legal counsel for Cornelius Vander Starr’s insurance companies and as counsel for the Miami National Bank, which laundered Meyer Lansky’s foreign mob profits and his skim from Las Vegas casinos.”

“Lansky was pals with Bugsy Siegel... Jewish mobsters, right?”

“Right—they founded Murder, Incorporated together in the 1920s. Nice guys. Helliwell went on to found Castle Bank in the Bahamas—another big-time money laundering operation. And by 1961, he’d become the paymaster for the CIA’s JM/WAVE Miami station, which was involved in Operation Mongoose—the multiple plots to assassinate Fidel Castro. They also suffered some heavy casualties during the bungled Bay of Pigs invasion. Operation Zapata, they called that one, after George H.W. Bush’s Zapata Off-shore Drilling Company, which helped them with the staging for that invasion. A lot of researchers believe

that JM/WAVE had something to do with Kennedy getting killed—maybe as an act of revenge because he’d refused to come through with air support when the Bay of Pigs was going down, so the CIA pigs got slaughtered.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” I say. I actually wrote a few paragraphs about it in my first book. “This shit never ends!” I complain.

Crash gives me a rueful grin. “Speaking of Cornelius Vander Starr... he was another former OSS operative. In 1967, he incorporated his insurance companies into the American International Group—better known as AIG. That’s the company that got so deep into credit default swaps that it almost took down the entire banking system during the 2008 financial crisis. AIG was given the largest taxpayer-funded bailout of any private company in U.S. history. This is all related to the Octopus in a loose way, but I don’t know if you can see it yet.”

“I’m getting an inkling...” I say, “but it seems like you’re all over the map right now.”

“I *am* all over the map. But so is the Octopus. I’m not sure this will help your understanding at the moment, but you should know that AIG’s former chairman and CEO, Maurice ‘Hank’ Greenberg, resigned in 2005 in the wake of a civil lawsuit over accounting fraud brought by the New York State Attorney General’s Office, led by Eliot Spitzer. That lawsuit is still ongoing, ten years later. In a not-so-strange coincidence, Hank’s son, Jeffery Greenberg, was chairman and CEO of Marsh & McLennan from 1999 to 2004, and he resigned, too—a year before his dad—after Eliot Spitzer initiated a civil action against Marsh & McLennan, accusing them of rigging bids, stifling competition, and cheating customers.

“In 2005, Marsh & McLennan settled with the New York State Attorney General’s Office and agreed to establish an 850 million dollar fund to compensate the clients they’d ripped off. That’s almost a billion dollars. So we’re talking *serious* fraud, because you have to assume the settlement amount was way below what they actually got away with.”

“So the Greenbergs are, uhm, people you *don’t* want to do business with.”

“Not unless you’re in deep with the Octopus. Marsh & McLennan also has some weird connections to 9/11. The widely criticized Iraq Occupation Governor appointed in 2003, L. Paul Bremer, had previously been the CEO of Marsh’s Crisis Consulting division. They had offices on floors 93 through 100 in the North Tower of the World Trade Center—the exact same floors that American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into. It was a direct hit. Everyone in those offices died that day—over 350 people. But in 2004, Marsh & McLennan decided to acquire Kroll—the company that had been in charge of security for the World Trade Center on 9/11; the very same company that was spying on *you*—in a deal that was valued at almost two billion dollars.”

I feel like my brain’s synapses are starting to implode. “Wait, now we’re back to Kroll? What happened to the Men in Black? At least *that* I could handle.”

“I’m circling around to Maury Island again... don’t worry. But first, you might be interested to know that *Wackenbut* has always been in charge of security at Area 51.”

“Don’t tell me that UFOs from Area 51 were responsible for the 9/11 attacks, Crash,” I say sharply. “Let’s not even go there.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to show you,” Crash says without a flicker of emotion, “although the trillions of dollars disappearing from the U.S. government’s balance sheet has to be going *somewhere*—maybe off-planet. But for now, I’m just trying to give you a sense of how all this stuff fits into one big matrix: intelligence operations and drug trafficking, politicians and terrorists, military spending and Mob money laundering, UFO hoaxes and Men in Black, computer software back doors and savings & loan failures, corporate espionage and insurance fraud, corrupt judges and wandering bishops, private security firms and very public false flag events... it’s all tied together. This is the Deep State. This is what Danny Casolaro called the Octopus.”

“This shit is fucked up and bullshit,” is all I can think to say while my mind works through another marine metaphor: *People*

like Paul Helliwell, Meyer Lansky, Allen Dulles, Cornelius Vander Starr, and the Greenbergs are the sharks that swim in deep water off the shores of polite society. They feed on us with their razor-sharp teeth because it's in their nature—they're born predators. They'll always bring harm to greater humanity because to behave otherwise would be to betray their most basic instincts. That they're allowed to thrive in this world, in the way that they do, only proves Huxley's premise:

This world must be some other planet's hell.

I can't help but recall that the last time I was thinking in marine metaphors, I was submerged in fathomless carnality with my lovely girlfriend. Maybe Freud was onto something with that stuff about how Eros and Thanatos are inextricably linked.

"Should we stop and get some more coffee?" Crash asks me.

Without even realizing it, I've been yawning. "Oh hell, yes..." I say, rattling the melted slush of ice cubes at the bottom of my jumbo-sized to-go cup. "Better make it a triple-shot espresso this time."

I look out the window to my right. We're passing a bunch of car dealerships: Porsche, Audi, Toyota, Kia.... Up ahead, a lone canary yellow Corvette is parked in front of a tractor supply store, reminding me that the U.S. still makes cars, too—although the Corvettes could be coming from Taiwan now, for all I know, just like our iPhones.

Crash veers off Route 202 and takes the Old York Road toward Lambertville, where he says we'll be able to find coffee. An ancient-looking billboard stands tall and weather-faded in a grassy field just beyond the junction. It features Smokey the Bear, informing us:

ONLY YOU CAN
PREVENT FOREST FIRES

I'm reminded that Smokey the Bear was Crash's favorite anthropomorphic animal while he was growing up, beating out

Tony the Tiger, Mickey Mouse, and that fey, turtleneck-wearing beatnik bear that used to peddle the heroin of children's breakfast cereals, Kellogg's Super Sugar Smacks. My brother later explained to me that Smokey was the only talking cartoon creature that gave him a deep and somehow profoundly satisfying sense of existential responsibility. As I wrote on the second page of my first *Crash Gordon* book, describing Crash's mental state when he was six years old: "Not a single forest fire has ravaged the town of Kingsburg, California, from the day he was born there, and Gordon is not averse to taking full credit for that fact."

I think to myself: *Maybe there should be an animated polar bear in a vintage deep sea diver's suit who goes around telling everyone: "Only YOU can thwart the Deep State" in the voice of Abbie Hoffman or Edward Snowden.*

"Didn't Abbie Hoffman end up living somewhere out here in a renovated turkey coop?" I ask Crash. I'd written about Hoffman's suspicious death in my second *Crash Gordon* book, blaming his alleged suicide on the Men in Black. At the time, I was under the impression that I was writing speculative fiction. But now, after Crash's revelations, I'm starting to think I might not have been all that far off the mark.

"According to your book, Abbie lived in New Hope," Crash reminds me. "That's the next town over, just across the bridge from Lambertville. We'll be passing right through it."

"I'd like to stop and pay my respects. Do you mind?"

"At the turkey coop? Do you know the address?"

"No, but we can ask someone."

"I doubt anyone will remember him, but we can try. Wasn't it out on somebody's llama ranch? It might be private property."

"It was," I say, remembering. "Okay. Forget it. But the next time we're drinking, let's raise a toast in Abbie's honor."

"He was a good guy," Crash says. "I admired the hell out of him for trying to break the story on Iran-Contra—years before Michael Riconosciuto opened up about it. That article he published in *Playboy* didn't do him any favors."

“What did he expect? No one reads *Playboy* for the articles. It might’ve gotten more play if he’d said that George Bush was wearing a pretty blue negligee when Gunther Russbacher flew him to Paris for an orgy with Adnan Khashoggi and the emissaries of the Ayatollah Khomeini at the Hotel Crillion.”

“I get what you’re saying,” says Crash, “but we should always be grateful to those softcore porn publishers who were willing to put serious money into investigative journalism. Bob Guccione, Larry Flynt, even Hugh Hefner... what they cared about most were our rights to free speech and freedom of the press—for the obvious reasons—but without those freedoms, democracy is dead in the water.”

“But we have the Internet now, dude! The truth is out there. It can’t be suppressed!”

“The truth is being obscured by a fog of disinfo and our own techno-narcissistic cluelessness. You know Gunther Russbacher has been portrayed on the Internet as a fraud and a flake, right? As soon as he started shooting his mouth off, he was locked up. Then he disappeared. His wife says they tried to kill him. Then they threatened to gang-rape him in prison. And finally, they washed him through a mind control program that was so effective that he couldn’t even remember being married to her.”

“I wasn’t aware of that. Shit.”

“If we don’t have a well-funded watchdog press to report on the criminal activities of the Deep State—along with an uncompromised federal justice system that’s willing put the scheming bastards in jail—then there’s no stopping the U.S. from a long, feckless slide toward crypto-fascism, narcoterrorism, and, eventually, World War Three.”

“So what we *don’t* want is a tight oligarchy controlling our news, like we’ve got now with Rupert Murdoch, Jeb Bezos, Comcast, Time-Warner, and less than a dozen other major media companies,” I extrapolate.

“Corporate-controlled news has always had its problems, at least as far back as William Randolph Hearst,” Crash says. He

should know. He was a journalist himself when he was in his twenties. I've written about how he interviewed William Randolph Hearst Jr. for a scrappy little newsweekly called the *Cambria Insurrectionist*. The Hearst interview was published as a not-very-flattering feature story—and shortly thereafter, the *Cambria Insurrectionist* was forced out of business.

Crash isn't finished: "The sort of watchdog journalism I'm talking about has always faced resistance from special interest groups, intelligence agencies, and rich, soul-eating cocksuckers like Bill Hearst," he says, "but it's much worse off now, because of the Internet. Almost all U.S. newspapers are running on skeleton crews these days. Serious journalists and their editors have been put out of work. Budgets have been slashed for investigative reporting, which can sometimes take months, or even years, before a story is ready to be published. That sort of in-depth reporting is increasingly being left to the independents. But you can't expect some self-financed guy with a Twitter account and a New York Public Library card to go up against the Deep State and win."

"No, not win, but maybe he can throw them off their game with 'a sideways swipe through hyperspace,' like Terence McKenna used to say."

"At best. I wouldn't hold out much hope for that, though. Without a major news outlet's reach and authority—and without thousands of honest, ethical, and absolutely *fearless* lawmen, special prosecutors, and congressional committees to bust that Deep State shit up—the chances for enacting meaningful change are slim. With modern surveillance techniques, any overt action against the Deep State by a lone individual is doomed to failure—unless you're a genius hacktivist like Edward Snowden. Thanks to Snowden, we now know that the Internet is a one-way mirror: they know everything about us, but we know next to nothing about them. We've all been algorithmically strip-searched, data-mined, and targeted by intelligence agencies and their corporate enablers like AT&T and Facebook. That makes the potential for blackmail almost limitless. If they don't already have a control file on you, they'll invent one. And if that doesn't

work, they'll kill you. I mean, look at what happened to Danny Casolaro."

"What *did* happen to him in the end? Who got to him? You still haven't told me."

"That's because no one knows for sure. But a California-based reporter named Cheri Seymour came up with a pretty good guess. She wrote a book about it called *The Last Circle*. Let's get some lunch and I'll tell you about it."

We've just entered Lambertville. As we drive down Bridge Street, we pass dozens of quaint 19th-century federal townhouses now devoted to the tourist trade: lots of art galleries, antique stores, and fancy coffee shops lit with Edison bulbs. Crash finds a good parking spot right across from Lambertville Station—an old train depot that's been converted to a hotel and restaurant with outdoor seating. He tells me he's eaten there before: the food is good and dogs are allowed to sit out on the back deck with their owners while they have lunch. That's good news for Trout. All three of us get out of the Volvo and cross the street in front of a bridge spanning the Delaware River, on the border between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. New Hope is just a short walk away, in Bucks County, on the other side.

Our waiter's name is Eddie. He's tall and skinny, with a shock of flame-orange hair and a pimply face accented by a silver bullring in his nose. He also has fashionable black discs embedded in his earlobes, enlarging the pierced holes there to about an inch-and-a-quarter in diameter. He looks like an albino Ubangi tribe reject—or a stretched leprechaun with sadomasochistic tendencies—but I take an instant liking to him because he fetches a bowl of water for Trout before we sit down. Anyone who refuses to treat dogs like second-class citizens is deserving of goodwill in my book.

"What's good today, Eddie?" Crash asks him.

Eddie recommends the fish and chips or the lobster roll. We both go with lobster rolls. After a brief pause to commune with Trout, Eddie takes off and we lean back in our chairs to wait for our food to show up.

“So—where were we?” I ask Crash.

“I was getting ready to tell you about Cheri Seymour.”

“The California reporter.”

“Yeah. She used to work in Mariposa County, about 100 miles north of where we grew up.”

“No shit. So she’s a San Joaquin Valley girl?”

“Sort of. Mariposa’s in the foothills between the Valley and Yosemite National Park. There’s not much going on out there. The whole county has less than twice the population of Kingsburg.”

“And we both know what a nowhere little town Kingsburg is. Mom says *Hi*, by the way.”

“Like hell she does.”

“I know: I’m just fucking with you. So how’d this Cheri Seymour chick get messed up with the Octopus?”

“The short version is that the Mariposa County Sheriff’s Department was involved in a major drug trafficking operation, and the clean cops who tried to put a stop to it were getting murdered. Plus, three Secret Service agents got taken out when a Mariposa County Sheriff’s Sergeant rammed their car and drove it off a 10-foot embankment while he was high on Demerol. That happened during a visit from Queen Elizabeth, before she put out the hit on Princess Diana because Diana was dating Dodi Fayed—the nephew of Adnan Khashoggi.”

“Cash-Hoggy—the billionaire arms dealer Bush bent over for at the Hotel Crillion? Iran-Contra, pretty blue negligee?”

“Yeah—it’s funny how those arms-for-drugs deals have a way of coming back around to bite everyone in the ass.”

“Uh-huh. What happened to the high-on-Demerol guy who killed the three Secret Service agents?”

“They gave him a promotion. Cheri Seymour said they made him Commander of the Mariposa Sheriff’s Department. It was a pretty big story for a small town newspaper reporter.”

"I'll say. So where'd she go with it? Knowing you, I'm assuming that's just the tip of the iceberg."

"You assumed right. She got involved with a citizen's action committee called Decency In Government—or DIG—because when your local sheriff's department has gone mad-dog, you need to team up with other concerned citizens and make your case to state and federal justice agencies. But as we know, the people at the top of those agencies can sometimes be corrupt, too. And that's what they started finding out: the California Attorney General and the Fresno FBI ignored DIG's requests for an investigation, so DIG went ahead and filed the largest civil rights lawsuit in California history. Then one day their attorney just walked out of his office and disappeared—never to be seen again."

"Sounds like Mexico, with all those people getting kidnapped and the cops and judges just looking the other way because they've been bought off by the drug cartels."

"It's the same deal here, only not so out in the open."

"Seriously?"

"That's what Cheri Seymour started finding out. While she was helping with the research on DIG's civil rights case, she ran across a 700-page report about sheriff's deputies dealing drugs in Tulare that—"

"*Tulare?* That's practically right next-door to Kingsburg! It's as close as Fresno."

"I know." Crash seems rather blasé about that stunning—to me, at least—geographical fact. "Didn't you ever wonder why it was so easy to buy drugs in high school?" he asks me. "Anyway, this report really impressed her. It had been put together by the former head of the Los Angeles FBI—a guy named Ted Gunderson."

"Sounds Swedish. Did he live in our town?"

Kingsburg is known as the Swedish Village. Immigrant Swedes used to account for 94% of its population back in the 1920s, but our hometown's current demographics skew more

toward fast-breeding Mexicans, like much of the rest of California. And now, from the sound of it, the only Swedes left are probably smoking crack, snorting crystal meth, and shooting pure Burmese skag into their Scandinavian eyeballs.

“Swedish or not, I’m pretty sure Ted Gunderson didn’t grow up in Kingsburg,” Crash says. “We would’ve heard about it. Cheri Seymour contacted him because he seemed like someone who could help out DIG. This was around 1991 or ‘92, just a few months after Danny Casolaro died. Gunderson had retired from the FBI and was working as a private investigator. He’d been involved in a lot of crazy-ass cases: the Franklin Scandal, the Finders cult, the McMartin preschool trial that started that whole ‘Satanic Panic’ thing in the eighties....”

That’s all familiar territory to me. And now I’m recalling that I’ve read about Ted Gunderson and his crusades against child-molesting Satanists before:

The Franklin Scandal is the shorthand term for the smog of heinous fuckery swirling about the Franklin Community Federal Credit Union in Omaha, Nebraska, where a smooth operator named Lawrence E. “Larry” King Jr. allegedly embezzled around 40 million dollars while running a child prostitution ring that catered to high-level U.S. politicians during the 1980s. Larry King had been the credit union’s manager and the Vice Chairman for Finance of the National Black Republican Council (I’ve come to think of him as the *anti-King*, in relation to Martin Luther King Jr.). The 1984 Reagan/Bush Presidential reelection campaign had appointed Larry King their “Chairperson for the Black Voters” and he’d sung the national anthem at the 1984 Republican convention. But he’d also been buddy-buddy with the notorious Church of Satan enthusiast, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Michael Aquino—self-proclaimed Temple of Set leader, military psyops expert, and alleged Presidio daycare center child molester extraordinaire.

Somehow, this was all tied-in with the financing of Iran-Contra and the blackmailing of prominent politicians by videotaping their cavortings at pedophile orgies. The victims of King’s

operation accused him of putting Project MONARCH mind-controlled orphan kids on private planes that flew them from Omaha to Washington D.C., where they were pimped at lavish “power cocktail” parties hosted by the well-connected Republican lobbyist Craig Spence (who was known to take gay call boys on midnight tours of the White House—and whose sex parties, according to the *Washington Times*, were attended by “key officials of the Reagan and Bush administrations, military officers, congressional aides, and U.S. and foreign businessmen with close ties to Washington’s political elite.”) Spence committed suicide—or was suicided—in 1989 and King spent the next several years of his life in prisons and mental institutions.

Lurid stuff. How much of it was true, I had no idea....

The Finders cult and the McMartin preschool trial were more of the same: evidence (later to be disputed) of child abuse and Satanism, allegations of military and/or intelligence agency involvement, along with tons of political pressure to shut down the investigations and suppress their findings. Ted Gunderson was on the righteous, crusading side of all three of those investigations, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he was covertly acting as a COINTELPRO agent, stirring the pot with wild allegations of “Satanic Ritual Abuse” and other junk conspiracy theories so the relatively more mundane, but very real, crimes of child abuse would be dismissed by a jury—which is exactly what happened in two out of the three cases. (The Finders cult investigation by U.S. Customs officials was shut down after it was designated a “CIA internal matter”—an internal matter involving kiddie porn, satanic goat sacrifices, and evidence of an international network for trafficking in abducted children, according to those same Customs officials’ reports.)

In short, I wanted to believe that Ted Gunderson was on the side of the angels, but I couldn’t be sure. In an oblique attempt to explain my suspicions to Crash, I say to him, “I’ve had dreams where I was running like Tarzan through an amusement park where this sinister Rube Goldberg type of contraption was trying to kill me in all kinds of crazy ways—and that’s what Ted Gunderson’s stuff reminds me of.”

“I know the feeling,” he says, “but did you forget you can fly?”

“Did I *what*?”

“Any good lucid dreamer is always aware that he’s dreaming. Once you acquire that expanded awareness, you start to have some control over your dreams. For instance, if a Rube Goldberg machine is trying to kill you, you can always will yourself to fly away.”

“Well, that sounds just dandy for dreams,” I sneer, “but it might not be all that helpful in Ted Gundersonland.”

One of the things I really love about Crash is that he never loses his cool with me, even when I’m being a smartass. “Look,” he says, “I could give you a lecture about *maya* and quantum physics and how we co-create the illusion of ‘reality’ with our collective perceptions—which amounts to a matrix of consensual lies about things we *think* we know, or imagine to be true—but that wouldn’t be all that helpful here. I know it’s hard to figure out what to believe when it comes to Ted Gunderson. We all know that a lot of dark stuff goes on in this world, but does it really get *that* dark?”

“Hard to say. I hope not.”

“Ted Gunderson seemed to believe that it did. At least in public, he sided with underage victims against some very powerful, amoral people. And it’s not that much of a leap, really, to arrive at his same conclusions if you think about the bedrock foundation of facts that we already know:

“Project ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA, Operation Often... *all facts*. The CIA has been deep into mind control projects since at least the early-fifties, beginning with those maniacs Dulles and Gottlieb. They tried to keep a lid on it—Richard Helms admitted to destroying the MKULTRA files right before the Church Committee inquiry—but they weren’t successful. John Marks used the Freedom of Information Act to find some mind control documents that had missed the CIA’s shredder. He wrote a book about it called *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*.”

“I know. I’ve read it,” I say.

“I’m sure you’ve also read *The Morning of the Magicians*,” Crash says. (*Correct.*) He keeps rolling: “The Church of Satan, the OTO, and the Temple of Set... again, *all facts*. People belong to those organizations and practice what Anton LaVey, Aleister Crowley, and Michael Aquino preached—because *sorcery works*. When you get right down to it, almost all secret societies practice occult rituals passed down from the Ancient Mystery Cults, and nearly all high-level politicians belong to at least a few secret societies that covertly steer their policies—Skull and Bones, the Freemasons, Bohemian Grove... you name it.

“Then there’s child abuse... *fact*—it happens, and far more often than most of us would like to admit. Reports of pedophilia and the ritualistic abuse of innocents have been a constant, throughout history, especially among priests. Just ask the Aztecs—or the Catholic Church. Or ask Richard Helms, who freaked the fuck out when he realized that records of the CIA’s disastrous mind control experiments on children might be exposed by the congressional investigations headed up by Frank Church and Otis Pike. Put it all together and Project MONARCH starts to look like the next stepping-stone in a long history of military-medico-occult-complex-sponsored evil.”

I reach for one of the glasses of iced tea that Eddie set down on our table as he was passing through a few moments earlier. “You just said a mouthful,” I observe, before taking a sip.

“I know. But you get what I’m saying, right? While I can’t vouch for the moral integrity of Ted Gunderson, I don’t think the kids were making shit up in all those cases he investigated. Something happened to them. Something terrible. And our justice system failed them at every turn.”

“So it wasn’t just ‘Satanic Panic’?”

“That’s what the False Memory Syndrome Foundation would have you believe—but, of course, their advisory board was stacked with MKULTRA alumni like Doctor Louis ‘Jolly’ West, Doctor Martin Orne, Margaret Singer, and Ralph Underwager.”

“Yeah, now I remember... but they’d probably tell me I was having a false memory there, right?”

“Right—just like they’d prefer you to forget that Ralph Underwager made some very public statements insinuating that he thought pedophilia was A-okay.”

“*Bastards!* And ‘Jolly’ West killed an elephant with LSD! It’s all coming back to me now.”

“Sometimes this stuff gets so twisted around that all you can do is laugh,” says Crash, who’s not anywhere close to laughing. “Ted Gunderson going up against it was kind of like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Almost fucking hopeless, but you had to admire the guy for trying.”

“As long as he wasn’t COINTELPRO or something.”

“Right. If he was COINTELPRO, or a disinfo agent, it’d only be poetic justice if Ted Gunderson was sucking Beelzebub’s cock in hell.”

“How’d we get started on him again?”

“Cheri Seymour. She got in touch with him because of that 700-page report he’d compiled for the Tulare City Council on drug trafficking in their town. He told Cheri Seymour that he knew a fair amount about what was going on in Mariposa, but he could put her in touch with an informant who knew a lot more. Before he did that, however, he wanted her to read some news clippings about Danny Casolaro’s investigation of the Octopus. I’m sure you can guess who the informant was....”

I don’t have to guess. “Michael Riconosciuto,” I say.

“You got it. A few days later, Cheri Seymour accepted a collect call from the Pierce County jail in Tacoma, where Riconosciuto was staying. He told her that a CIA ‘Old Boys’ network based in Fresno was responsible for the drug trafficking in her area. It was part of a larger group of former intelligence agents, law enforcement, and military types—all leading charmed lives—that had started out of Lexington, Kentucky and Mena, Arkansas. They were all involved in a major drug smuggling ring known as The Company.”

“Isn’t that what the CIA calls itself?” I ask. I’m sure I’ve heard that somewhere before.

“They’re obviously interrelated,” says Crash. “According to Michael Riconosciuto, The Company was handling the drug side of Iran-Contra in the U.S., moving tons of cocaine and heroin that had been sent by the Contras and the Afghan Mujahideen in return payment for arms shipments from Ollie North & Associates. As a lucrative sideline, The Company was also operating government-sanctioned meth labs in Fresno, Madera, and Mariposa counties.”

“No wonder Fresno’s the artisanal meth capital of America!”

“Is that an official statistic, or are you just making shit up?” my brother asks me with a doubtful look on his face.

“Just making it up,” I admit, “although it sure seemed that way when I was in high school. Wasn’t Fresno the meth murder capital of California, at least?”

“It might’ve been, on a per capita basis. Riconosciuto said the Fresno arm of The Company was using sheriff’s deputies and Hells Angels to off-load their drugs. There was also a tie-in to a big concession operator in Yosemite National Park called the Curry Company—owned by MCA—that was making over 80 million a year while it served as a drug trafficking front.”

I happen to know that Crash had hung out with Hells Angels during a camping trip to Yosemite when he was thirteen years old. It had been a seminal experience for him (in more ways than one...). So I say to him:

“I guess those Hells Angels you met at Dinkey Creek weren’t such big rebels, after all, if they were working for the CIA.”

“Hey, screw you...” says Crash, kicking my shin under the table. “I *liked* those Hells Angels. They got me stoned for the first time, ever, and then they set me up with that girl in the leopard skin bikini—Francesca. They’re a great bunch of guys and I’m proud to have known them.”

“Did I hear someone say Hells Angels?” Eddie asks as he makes a diabolical appearance with our lobster rolls, seemingly from out of nowhere.

“Wow, that was fast! Thanks, Eddie...” I tell him.

“Some of those biker gangs come through here every once in a while,” he says. “The Hells Angels are always big tippers.”

“Good to know!” Crash turns to me and says, “See? I told you they’re good guys.”

“Yeah, but if you cross ‘em, they’ll skullfuck you in a heartbeat,” says Eddie as he walks away with a perky smirk.

I feel vindicated. “Okay, you big hypocrite...” I say to my two-faced brother, “go ahead: tell me more about the evil drug dealers in California.”

“There’s almost too much to tell,” Crash says. If he’s feeling chagrined, he doesn’t show it. “If you want all the details, you should read Cheri Seymour’s book. What’s important for our present conversation is that she picked up where Danny Casolaro left off. She gained Michael Riconosciuto’s trust and got access to his private files—hidden away in a trailer out in the desert, near Death Valley. Those files documented pretty much everything he told her. He really *did* work for Wackenhut and modify the code in PROMIS, and so on.”

“So he wasn’t just a pathological liar, after all.”

“Apparently not. Cheri Seymour started interviewing some of the same people that Danny had been interviewing right before he died. One of them was a slithery charmer named Robert Booth Nichols, who was working as a contract agent for the National Security Council. Before that, he’d been doing shadowy work for the CIA for over 20 years. But he also had deep ties, as a money launderer, to the Gambino crime family, the Cali Cartel, and Japan’s Yakuza crime syndicate. People described him as looking like Clark Gable without the goofy ears. He was a handsome guy. There are some pictures floating around on the Internet of Nichols hanging out with John Lear and Sam Israel, if you want to see for yourself.”

We’re back in familiar territory again. “John Lear, the ‘Aliens-Are-Secretly-Running-the-World’ guy?” I ask Crash.

“Yeah. You know him?”

“Only by reputation. I’m not into all this Octopus stuff, like you, but I’ve been watching the wilder UFO videos on UTube for a while now. John Lear and Bob Lazar blew the lid off Area 51 twenty-five years ago. They’re both so out-there that I don’t know what to make of them. Lear could be telling the truth—I mean, he was one of the most awesome pilots, ever—but he also admits that he worked for the CIA, so everything he says could be flat-out disinfo, designed to sucker in the gullible. Although *to what end*, I don’t know. It’s not like he’s cashing in.”

“Maybe he just gets off on furthering the alien agenda,” Crash suggests. “Or the *Archontic* agenda. It’s the same deal with Robert Booth Nichols—there’s no telling what his game is, really—although he was *definitely* cashing in and he never had to pay income taxes. He conned the hedge fund manager, Sam Israel, out of ten million dollars, for instance, by promising him back door computer trading access to a top-secret shadow market where the Federal Reserve was issuing Treasury bonds at a huge discount to their actual financial market value in order to keep the world’s banks solvent and finance the black budgets for U.S. intelligence agencies—which, if genuine, could have been exploited by Israel to make hundreds of millions, or even *billions*, in a very short amount of time.”

“Sounds like PROMIS coming around again,” I say.

“Or something like it, coded by PTech—which now goes by the name Go Agile.” Crash sighs as if even *he* has a hard time keeping all this convoluted Deep State shit straight. “Nichols was known as a *facilitator*,” he says, “someone that the president of MCA’s Home Entertainment Division could call up, for instance, when he needed to shut down the FBI’s wiretap investigation into MCA’s ties to John Gotti and the Mob, so MCA could be sold to Matsushita Electric for 6.6 billion dollars in 1990—which, at the time, was the largest leveraged buyout of a U.S. corporation by foreigners in American history.”

“Did that really happen... the FBI shutdown?”

“Cheri Seymour says it did. Eugene Giaquinto, at MCA, made a call to his ‘government man’—Robert Booth Nichols—

and asked him to get the FBI off MCA's case so they could close the deal with the Japanese. Nichols made a call to some friends in the Department of Justice and the FBI was told to back down. Just like that. Some of the FBI agents on the case were super-pissed. One of them, Thomas Gates, went public about it and ended up getting sued by Nichols for eleven million dollars for slandering his 'good' name. Luckily for Gates, the judge in that case wasn't on the take and Nichols' claims were dismissed—*twice*—as baseless.

"There's a certain irony in all this. Ted Gunderson had been one of only three people interviewed for the job of becoming the third Director of the FBI in 1979—he was *that* close to being the J. Edgar Hoover of our generation—and the irony is that Ted was great friends with both Robert Booth Nichols and Michael Riconosciuto from 1982 until Nichols' mysterious death (or disappearance) in 2009. And Nichols and Riconosciuto had been working together as close associates since 1967. Those three guys were Danny Casolaro's main sources—he'd spent countless hours on the phone with each of them—and one of them, it's almost certain, got Danny killed."

"Which one?" I ask.

"It's a toss-up," says Crash. "Michael Riconosciuto was in jail at the time, so we know *he* didn't do it—at least not directly. But he'd told Danny that a former chief of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs, a guy named Michael Abbell, had been laundering money for the Cali Cartel—and that was extremely dangerous information to be giving out. Riconosciuto claimed that Robert Booth Nichols had paid Mike Abbell fifty thousand dollars in the early eighties to 'crowbar' the extradition of two Cali Cartel leaders from Columbia—Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and José Santacruz-Londoño—so they couldn't be prosecuted here in the United States. According to Nichols, his buddies Gilberto and José were 'intelligence people'—so it was his job to make sure they were left alone."

"Danny phoned up Nichols and asked him if Riconosciuto's allegations about Mike Abbell and the Cali Cartel were true."

Nichols told Danny that pursuing that line of questioning could get him killed. The Cali Cartel, at that time, was supplying eighty percent of all the cocaine in the U.S., and ninety percent of the coke for Europe. So there's a very real possibility that Nichols made the decision to have Danny killed. He might have even done the job himself. A former CIA operative who knew Nichols described him as 'lethal.' He'd watched Nichols dangle a professional hitman named Sam Marowitz upside down on a hoist in front of a small plane inside a hangar; then Nichols got in the plane and revved the engine, so the guy was sucked toward the prop. So he certainly seemed capable of 'suiciding' a journalist.

"But there's a third possibility: Danny was also supposed to be meeting with two FBI agents driving up from Lexington, Kentucky to discuss some aspects of his investigation with him. Lexington, if you'll recall, was one of the The Company's main drug distribution hubs, along with Fresno and Mena, Arkansas—where legendary cocaine smuggler Barry Seal had been using old Air America cargo planes to fly billions of dollars' worth of drugs in and out of the Intermountain Regional Airport in Mena under then-Governor Bill Clinton's watch, while Vice President George H.W. Bush headed up the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System, established in 1983."

"You're fucking kidding me..." I say. "Bush was in charge of the National Narcotics Border during Reagan's War on Drugs? That's even worse than letting a fox guard your henhouse. It's more like letting the fox commit chicken genocide and then write the official history of chickens that'll be taught in schools."

"Exactly!" Crash laughs. It comes out sounding a little harsh: the laughter scorning his own laughter. "So who knows?" he says. "Those two FBI agents could've been working for The Company. They might've decided to silence Danny before he exposed their whole operation. Or maybe Robert Booth Nichols was worried that Danny would spill his information about Mike Abbell and the Cali Cartel to honest FBI agents. In that case, Nichols—or even Ted Gunderson—might have decided that Danny had to be taken out."

“In an interview with Cheri Seymour, Michael Riconosciuto said: ‘Danny’s theory was different from the typical mega-conspiracy theory. Danny was dealing with real people and real crimes.’ And that’s what got him killed. He wasn’t looking at vast, humanity-screwing conspiracies from a historical perspective, like we are now. He was unraveling conspiracies in real-time. People might have been sent to prison if Danny had been able to publish what he’d discovered. Just like Mike Abbell was sentenced to prison in 1999 for laundering money for the Cali Cartel, after a four-year DEA investigation known as Operation Cornerstone.”

“So all that shit was really happening?”

“It was. By following his leads on the PROMIS case, Danny had uncovered one of the biggest conspiratorial clusterfucks in U.S. history.”



There’s not much left to say after that. While we sit eating our lobster rolls, Crash waxes poetic, sort of. He says he knows Danny was a man of the world—44 years old at the time of his death; a divorced dad who lived on a ranch, where he raised purebred Arabian horses; a serial lover of beautiful women, who’d been married to a former Miss Virginia for ten years—but Crash often imagines him as an intrepid blonde-haired boy in a tiny rowboat, way out on the ocean (somewhere out in the Bermuda Triangle, perhaps). He sees Danny fishing, more for sport than from hunger. But when Danny hooks into the Octopus, strange and terrible things start happening. The Octopus is amoral and quick to anger. It likes to hide in the Deep State, where it can snatch its prey from the shadows. When Danny threatens to haul it up into the light, the Octopus bellows: “I will cut his body and throw it to the sharks!” It reaches up and wraps its tentacles around Danny’s slender wrists, dragging him into the ocean’s depths, where all good boys go to drown.

“The tree that would grow to heaven must send its roots to hell,” Crash says, rather enigmatically. He’s quoting Nietzsche, but I won’t figure that out until later. A believer in reincarnation, my brother adds, “I hope Danny learned enough to break the cycle of samsara, so he won’t have to keep coming back.”

Me, I see Danny—the man—adrift beneath the ocean with his briefcase full of Octopus notes and a to-go cup from Starbucks. In my mind’s eye, a great white shark is about to swallow him whole, in a big-fish-eats-the-little-fish scenario. But the great white shark (*the Deep State*) is also on the verge of being gulped down by an enormous, prehistoric-looking crocodile-fish (*the Archons*), which, in turn, is ensnared in the fearsome tentacles of a giant squid (*the Demiurge*) risen from the darkest depths below.

What if Crash is right and a tentacle of the Octopus has latched onto Pam? *God, I hope he’s wrong.* I don’t want Pam to be dead—not even if it means she’ll be liberated from the soul-sucking cycle of samsara. I want her back, with me, the way we were. I recognize how selfish that seems from a purely spiritual perspective, but I’m not enough of a bodhisattva on that score yet to deny my feelings.

Is love the final samsaric attachment—the last “terrible and irresistible affection” that has to be purged before we can attain nirvana? I don’t know. My current thinking on the subject is that if nirvana is lacking in love, then it’s probably overrated.



After lunch, we take Trout for a walk along the Delaware River so he can do some territorial pissing. Then we get back in the Volvo for the last leg of our journey into Amish country. By the time we arrive at the address Crash has programmed into the onboard navigation system, it feels like we’ve traveled through a time warp into America’s agrarian past. We’ve seen fields plowed by horses, men in straw hats fishing from the banks of a clear blue lake, and a complete lack of cars on the roads, aside from our own. We find a white fencepost with the right address

painted on it beside a two-track dirt road leading down, and then up again, to a distant Victorian farmhouse on a green hill. A big red barn looms behind it. Crash turns down the rutted road, but then stops and backs up onto the county asphalt again when he sees a bearded Amish man on a buckboard wagon coming up the road to greet us.

The greeting is rather curt. The man just nods his head at us as his two hay-flecked brown horses pull the buckboard past the Volvo's front grill. There's something unsettling about his distrustful gaze and the grim scowl trapped within his wiry, rust-colored beard. It makes me feel like a trespasser—some feckless city slicker infringing on his pastoral world. He could just be shy, or intimidated by our shiny black Volvo SUV, but then I think: *No. Out here, I'm just another interloping urban dickhead, bamboozled by the modern world.*

When we finally get to the farmhouse, a Golden Retriever scurries down the grassy hill to meet us. She's wagging her whole body—eight swollen, distended teats swaying beneath her, telling me at a glance that she must be the pups' mother. She goes right up to Crash as soon as he gets out of the car. My brother has never been great with people, but he's the sort of guy who always smiles and says hello to dogs. The dogs always smile right back at him. Crash crouches to pet the Retriever and in five seconds flat they're the best of friends. She starts licking him along the edge of his chin as if he's been shaving with peanut butter.

"I see you've met Bridie," says a barefoot woman in a dull gray handsewn smock coming down the steps from the farmhouse. She looks like the woman in Grant Wood's famous portrait with the pitchfork, *American Gothic*. She's skinny and dour, wearing a white linen pilgrim's bonnet and incongruous bottle-blue sunglasses. "You're here for a puppy," she says, as if it's a statement of fact, not a question.

"We are," Crash answers. "I spoke to you on the phone yesterday. I'm Gordon and this is my brother, Derek. I think we might be a little early."

“No. You’re right on time,” the woman says. Two meek young boys appear on the steps behind her. They’re clad in plain black cotton trousers held up by suspenders over solid beige short-sleeved shirts. Somehow, the outfits make them look oddly grown-up, although both of them are barefoot, like their mother, with boyish Beatles haircuts. They also have the same distrustful gaze in their wide, watery eyes that we saw in their father when he passed us on his buckboard.

One of the boys, I notice, has six perfectly formed fingers on each hand. I wonder how that works. Does it give him a killer edge on the piano? If so, I hope he’s getting lessons.

“The puppies are in the barn,” the woman says. She still hasn’t told us her name. She starts walking up the hill. Before I start after her, I say, “We brought my girlfriend’s dog with us. I was hoping we could let him out to help us pick the right puppy. I’ll keep him on a leash. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine,” the woman says, over her shoulder. She’s all business. Crash follows her up the hill to the barn while I get Trout out of the Volvo. Bridie sticks around so she can give Trout a sniff as soon as he bounds out through the back hatch on his leather leash. There’s some flamboyant tail wagging and a few frisky yips. Bridie reaches up and bats Trout’s nose with the pads on the bottom of her forepaw. It’s a strangely elegant gesture. They seem to like each other.

Inside the barn, the puppies are corralled behind a low, wire fence. The dank smell of dung and hay is almost overpowering, but *goddam* those puppies are cute. There are nine of them: nine happy, fat, tail-wagging bundles of creamy golden fluff. Six boys and three girls, the woman informs us. They rush up to the wire fence and lick at our fingers as we crouch down to get a better look at them.

“I can let them out,” the woman says.

“That’d be great,” says Crash.

She unhooks a wooden gate toward the back of the corral and most of the puppies go streaming out of it. Two of them stay

behind, looking quizzically at Crash with their soulful brown eyes, trying to get at him through the fence. “It’ll be one of these two, I’m guessing,” he says. Without another word, we both lean over the low fence and pick up the two remaining puppies—one for each of us—a boy and a girl. We take them outside the barn to set them down on the grass with the others.

There’s a lot of innocent fun to be had in watching a bunch of puppies run around on a sunny day. Bridie picks up a dried-out cornstalk and starts playing tug-o’-war with some of her brood. Others pups bounce around on their plump-pawed little legs, or flop down on their soft, fuzzy round bellies to gnaw on tufts of grass. Trout noses around, sniffing at every pup, as if that’s the best way to determine which one we should take home with us. Crash picks a spot on the lawn and sits down, waiting to see if any of the puppies will come over to him. Several of them do, but one in particular—the one he took out of the barn, I’m almost certain—keeps coming back around to him and looking up at him, nose-to-nose, while Crash pets him from ears to tail.

After Trout decides he’s sniffed enough, I pick a spot and sit down, too. Bridie drops the cornstalk and comes over to sit beside me. She leans the full weight of her body against me, expecting pats. What a sweetheart of a dog. She’s panting, as if being the mother to all those frisky pups has left her in a permanent state of exhaustion.

“You did great, Bridie,” I tell her. “These are some of the best puppies I’ve ever seen. You’re a good mama.”

Bridie licks my cheek as if to thank me for the compliment.

“I think I’ve made my decision,” says Crash. The puppy that was looking at him nose-to-nose is now curled up in his lap with a happy little dog grin on his face.

I’ve never thought of myself as a sentimental guy, but something about that scene causes my eyes to mist over with tears. On some mysterious level, it ties in with my feelings for Pam—and Pam’s lack—but it also brings the true purpose of our Amish excursion into sharp focus:

My brother, the notorious recluse, is finally ready to share his life with a friend.



I do the driving on the return trip, so Crash can sit in the passenger seat with his new puppy in his lap, stroking his golden fur and feeding him bits of kibble. The puppy is surprisingly okay with leaving his mother and brothers and sisters behind. I'd expected some whimpering, at least, but there's been nothing like that—maybe because Trout is with us, telling the pup in dog-language that everything's going to be okay. But really, I think it's because Crash and the puppy have already established a deep human-dog bond. He's decided to call him Guy de Bored, as a tip-of-the-hat to the famous Situationist, and also as a descriptor of little Guy's inevitable mental life: "Because every dog gets bored..." as Crash explains it. "They can't just pick up a book and start reading whenever there's a lull."

We stop at a Walmart along the way so we can buy a bag of the same dog chow that the Amish family was feeding the pups (*Ol' Roy Puppy Complete*, 50 lb., \$19.98). Crash says he'll transition Guy to the premium stuff from Whole Foods or Petco in a gradual way to avoid digestive upsets. For a guy who's never had a puppy before, he sure seems to know a lot about them.

I hear my iPhone trilling in my pocket as I'm lugging the fifty-pound bag of puppy chow across the Walmart parking lot. I decide to let the call go to voicemail so I won't have to set the bag down on the oily asphalt. After I wrestle it into the back of the Volvo, I check to see who called. It's a New York number I don't recognize, but I have no trouble recognizing the voice that left the message. It's Detective Pucciarelli. Remember him?

"Derek! Good news!" he says. "We found your girlfriend." There's a pause, and then a gruff, wheezy laugh. "She's on the cover of *VanityWeek*. Check it out and then give me a call."

YALDABAOTH TAKES A STAB AT TRASH JOURNALISM

To: **Jeb Beezos** <jbeezos@glamazon.com>

From: Yaldabaoth <yaldabaoth@archonsrus.com>

Pesky Authors Redux

March 27, 2015 at 11:11 AM

Hey hey, Jay-B...

It's been a while. Have you seen the latest issue of *VanityWeek*? I'm quite pleased with our handiwork. If I didn't know better, I might have been convinced the photos were genuine. And what did you think of my accompanying prose? Did you read it? If not, I've attached a .PDF below. I usually leave such details to others, but for this particular project I thought I'd enjoy taking a stab at the trashy, tabloid-style of journalism that my Archons pioneered. Call me when you're up to speed.

The Artist Formerly Known as Prince of Lies,

Y



Limn & Conye *SPLIT!*

Knocked up and devastated! Limn Lardassian's world crumbles as Conye dumps her for sexy Pam From Siam!

It all began with a text. While snooping on hubby Conye Best's phone last week, newly pregnant Limn Lardassian made a shocking discovery: Conye was sending flirtatious text messages to UTube's Underboob Selfie Queen, Pam From Siam. Up to that point, the Thai genius-girl provocateur—famous for her scantily clad lectures on highbrow literature and quantum physics—had been refusing to text Conye back. But that all changed this past Wednesday, when Pam and Conye were seen together in public, holding hands, at the ritzy rooftop bar of the Peninsula Hotel in New York City. When shivering Pam exited the posh hotel later that night, she was wearing Conye's coat—and little else.

(See *VanityWeek's* exclusive paparazzi pics, next page.)

Conye stayed out partying with Pam until 4 AM. When he finally returned home, "Limn went ballistic," a source close to the couple told *VanityWeek*. "She accused Conye of cheating on her with Pam From Siam in one of the Peninsula's hotel rooms. 'Is that why you were out so late?' Limn asked him, her voice dripping with condescension. 'Were you all Thai'd up?' Conye denied betraying Limn, but his pleas of innocence only infuriated her more. Every time he tried to defend himself, Limn accused him, again, of having an affair. Then Conye lost his cool when he realized Limn had been spying on him." According to our source: "Conye asked her, 'How'd you know I was at the Peninsula tonight, b*tch?' Limn, furious, admitted to reading Conye's text messages and tracking him by GPS, but she justified her actions by saying,

‘Every whore in the celebrity baller matrix knows you can’t keep your own Peninsula in your pants. Beezos rules you like a sock puppet, you horny black skank-f*cker.’”

The lovers’ quarrel escalated from there. Voices were raised. Doors were slammed. “Limn’s been acting hormonal and crazed ever since she got preppers again,” said one of Limn’s closest friends. “She’s also really self-conscious about her changing body. And Conye hasn’t stepped up to make her feel any better about herself. Before he stormed out, he told Limn she was too fat by half. ‘All you do is eat!’ he yelled at her. ‘Last time you got knocked up you looked like the damn Michelin Man! I can’t hang with that. Maybe I’ll come back after you lose all your baby fat.’ He left Limn in tears.” In the aftermath of their ferocious spat, “Limn felt like she’d been dumped—and that she and Conye were headed for divorce.”

Limnye? More like Limn-NAY. Both refuse to back down as they spend their days apart. Conye was noticeably absent as Limn, 33, and their daughter, South-by-Southwest, 2, spent the next day frolicking on the beaches of St. Barts in the Caribbean with Limn’s four

glamorous sisters and transgendered stepdad, Goose Bender, 69. Conye was in the gloomy Pacific Northwest, where he’s recording a David Bowie tribute album with *Ziggy Stardust* producer Ken Scott, 68, at Bad Animals Studio—the historic Grunge landmark in downtown Seattle. Insiders say the rapper, 37, is telling people “he’s the new David Bowie” and has “big, hairy, audacious plans” to continue the Thin White Duke’s legendary work. Informed that Bowie is still alive, Conye was overheard saying, “Don’t sweat it, bro. The Jean Genie’ll be back in the bottle soon enough.”

There’s another reason Conye’s fascination with the high-IQ Thai looker doesn’t bode well for Limn. She worries that she’s not smart enough for Conye. “In the weeks leading up to their blow-out, Conye had insisted on watching all of Pam From Siam’s UTube videos with Limn,” our inside source told *VanityWeek*. “He wanted Limn to get an education from Pam’s erudite lectures. But Limn didn’t see how quantum physics was going to help her apply makeup or go shopping, so she just slept through most of the videos. Now she’s consumed with doubt and jealousy, wondering if Conye is ready to trade-in his dumb,

porky wife for a super-smart, sexy new girl. Limn usually orders everyone around like an empress, but now she's feeling vulnerable because she's getting fat and questioning her own intelligence—and that's why she doesn't trust Conye anymore."

Drugs are becoming an issue in the marriage. Conye admitted to taking "a heroic dose" of psilocybe cubensis mushrooms just hours before accepting his MTV Video Vanguard Award at the VMAs recently in a rambling, grandiose, and utterly bizarre speech. Limn looked on in horror as Conye called everyone "bro" and spoke out against the Illuminati: "...those alien lizardfish motherf*ckers who enslave humanity and control the voting for Best Female Video with mind control beams sent from their secret base on the Other Side of the Moon." Conye went on to inform the audience that the Moon was in fact an alien spacecraft with a holographic skin of craters to deceive astronomers. ("Check the numbers, people! Why does it line up perfectly with the sun during an eclipse? *It shouldn't even be there!*") Then Conye announced he'd be running for president on the Martyred Artist ticket in 2020. "Limn hates

drugs..." a source close to Limn told *VanityWeek*, "even though she pops Xanax and extra-strength Motrin PM like they're friggin' jellybeans. But what mortified her most about Conye's VMA acceptance speech was that he didn't even acknowledge all she's done for his career. Not a single mention. She blamed that on the drugs, too. She was livid."

Now Limn is lashing out while Conye refuses to apologize. There's no truce in sight. In a moment of Pinot Grigio induced weakness, Limn embarrassed herself with a childish Instagram post aimed at Pam From Siam. Our insider informed *VanityWeek* just before this issue went to press that Limn had posted an old photo of her and Conye reclining on a Versace sofa with cute South-by-Southwest asleep in her father's arms. A lyric from one of Conye's songs was placed next to it: "Now that I got me a good girl and a family, I don't need no hood rats to blow me." Said our insider, "Limn posted that lyric to send a clear message, but it may have backfired. Everyone knows Pam From Siam is the exact opposite of a hood rat. Limn now fears she's only made things worse by highlighting her own insecurities." Conye isn't

making any effort to contact her. “Limn thinks Pam From Siam might be with Conye in Seattle because he isn’t attracted to his pregnant wife anymore.” The insider added: “It’s driving Limn crazy. She’s terrified that Conye has split with her for good. She’s married to the world’s most

impactful rap star, she has a lavish twenty million dollar mansion and her own reality TV show, an adorable two-year-old daughter and a second baby on the way, but Limn Lardassian, like the rest of us, just can’t seem to nail down her happily-ever-after.”



“Hey, Y. So I read your article....”

“And? What’d you think?”

“Honestly? I wasn’t too thrilled with that ‘Beezos rules you like a sock puppet’ line. Did you really have to put that in there?”

“Jeb, Jeb, Jeb... you’ve misunderstood. Our man Conye refers to *his penis* as Beezos. It’s a well-known fact. No one’s going to think it has anything to do with *Jeb Beezos*—or our behind-the-scenes manipulations. Consider it an inside joke.”

“Still, I don’t see why we should be taking chances like that. What if Derek Swannson puts it together?”

“And what if he does? Do you think he’ll fly to Seattle and make a citizen’s arrest? Based on what evidence? Really, Jay-B, you’re far too easily spooked for someone who’s worth north of fifty billion dollars.”

“I just got a bad feeling while I was reading. Like we screwed up somehow. Are you sure Limn and Conye are okay with this? That stuff you wrote about them was pretty harsh.”

“They *have* to be okay with it. They’re *celebrities*. It’s their job to do my bidding. If they rebel, the hammer comes down—and they both know it.”

“Conye didn’t seem to know it when he was out of his mind on ‘shrooms at the MTV Awards.”

“Yes, that was unfortunate, but no lasting harm was done. He was reprimanded and told to never mention the Moon Base again. We can’t undo what he said, but we can mock him and make him look like a lunatic.”

“I still can’t believe there’s really a Moon Base.”

“I’ll take you there someday, if you need proof, but I doubt you’ll enjoy it. The accommodations are rather Spartan.”

“No thanks. I’ll stay right here with my juicy steak dinners and my beloved Seattle rain. I’m not ready to make the switch to green cheese and fake lunar landscapes.”

“They eat Loosh up there, not green cheese. Food for the Moon, we call it—a cannibalistic feasting on cracked-open souls. But I understand what you’re saying. Although it’s the true seat of power in our solar system, I find the Moon too cold, too focused on business. I hardly ever go there myself.”

“Even though you own the place.”

“It could be said I own everything, Jay-B. I certainly own *you*. But that’s not what I wished to discuss today. It’s time for us to plan the next phase of our attack on Derek Swannson.”

“We’ve already poisoned him twice, threatened him with a mountain lion, and made him think his girlfriend is banging Conye Best. He’s stopped writing, just like you wanted. Haven’t we done enough?”

“No, we haven’t. He’s refusing to sign with the Wisners. Too many potential futures still show him getting the better of us. We have him on the ropes, but he’s not out for the count yet.”

“Oh hell. So what’s next?”

“I’ve told my Archons to release the Kraken. It’s stalking time for the Moonboys—and the Bewlay Brothers.”

MEET THE NEOCONS, SAME AS THE ARCHONS

I was a big fan of existentialism when I was in college. Jean-Paul Sartre really rocked my world. His book, *La Nausée*, explained the concept of existential nausea in a way that made me feel less alone, less freakish. Sartre had been there before me. He really captured that feeling of being an observing alien in an absurd and somewhat sinister physical landscape—the samsaric detective as *Gitanes*-smoking Frenchman. Sartre’s lack of good looks and less-than-cheery outlook on life wouldn’t have made him a big hit on Facebook these days, but I say, “So what if that old frog philosopher had a lazy eye and bad teeth and he was chased down the Champs-Élysées by a pack of super-intelligent crabs from the 30th-century after he took too much mescaline.” What’s more important—to me, at least—is that he wrote some thought-provoking books and made sweet kinky love to Simone de Beauvoir—the feminist with the sexiest name, ever. In my personal pantheon of intellectual heroes, Jean-Paul Sartre will always be right up there with suave Albert Camus.

But now I’m wondering how Sartre would’ve handled seeing Miles Davis leaping over a lavender velvet couch in pursuit of a giggling Simone de Beauvoir clad in white booty shorts on the cover of *Vogue Paris*. Because my own existential nausea meter shoots up to a whole new level when I see Conye and Pam captured in that same scenario on the cover of *VanityWeek*,

displayed in multiple copies on a fake oak magazine kiosk in Grand Central Station with the bright, hideous yellow headline:

LOVERS LEAP!

Conye Leaves Limn For Pam From Siam

Right after that radioactive-piss-colored headline registers in my amygdala, I end up projectile vomiting a pink spew of liquefied lobster roll into an MTA garbage can in front of hundreds of appalled commuters. It's not one of my proudest moments.

Like ol' Jean-Paul used to say: "Hell is other people."

Maybe guys like Conye Best think monogamy is a joke—some loser strategy for beta males—but I'm a firm believer in the soul mate concept. Pam is the only woman for me. I'm like a swan or a wolf or a puckered up French angelfish that way. It makes me sick—literally (and very publicly) *sick*—to think that Pam might not feel the same way.

I'd darted into Grand Central on our way back to Crash's place with Guy de Bored, because when Detective Pucciarelli left his voice message for me, the latest issue of *VanityWeek* still hadn't been distributed in New Jersey. Now, as I slide back behind the wheel of the Volvo—illegally parked in a bus zone on East 42nd Street—I'm the humiliated possessor of two new copies of *VanityWeek* and a horrendous case of puke-breath. Existential nausea is still riding me like a night hag, but my stomach is empty. There's nothing left to barf up—except my celebrity-stomped heart.

As I hand Crash the magazines, he takes one look at the cover and laughs, that fucker.

"It's an obvious Photoshop job..." he says. He should know. He was Pier 69 Studios' senior photo retoucher during his first few years in New York—and before that, he was the director of

digital art at the largest commercial photography studio complex in the Pacific Northwest for five or six years.

Oh, I think to myself. Oh yeah. Of course it's Photoshopped.

Just like that, my nausea vanishes. The traffic along 42nd Street suddenly sounds like poetry to my ears. The cooing of lice-ridden pigeons, the elephantine honking of a city bus right on my ass, some silver-haired Wall Street douchebag in a pinstripe suit yelling, “*Hey! Watch it, asshole!*” as I almost run him over—it all seems beautiful to me. I’m ready to revel in the quotidian again.

Maybe my girl isn't fucking Conye, after all....



Crash dissects the *VanityWeek* cover photo for me when we get back to his apartment:

“See how Pam’s hair is backlit by that window behind her? Now look at Conye—that too-even luminosity around his upper body? That’s a Photoshop effect called Inner Glow. It’s supposed to simulate backlighting on a silhouetted image. But see how the light is streaming through Pam’s hair? That same light should be coming through Conye’s shirt here and here—but it’s not. And check out the champagne glasses. This was almost clever of them.... That first glass on the coffee table in the foreground is showing a reflection of Conye and the couch. So that was really there for Conye’s shot. But look at the champagne glass on the back windowsill—which ties the two photos together. It’s only showing a tiny sliver of Pam’s reflection on the far left side of the glass. It should also be reflecting the back of the couch and Conye’s upper body. Instead, it’s just showing an upside down cityscape in the champagne. They should have cloned that out, like they did with everything else in the window, but it’s so small, they might not have noticed it. I’m pretty sure though, that I’m seeing an upside down Space Needle in there. Back in the

nineties, when I lived in Seattle, that was pretty much my same view from Queen Anne Hill.”

“Right side up, of course,” I append.

“Yeah, right side up,” says Crash, looking at the upside down magazine cover through a magnifying glass.

Trout and Guy growl mock-ferociously, playing tug-o’-war with a short length of knotted red rope they found on the plank floor behind us. Guy’s new home comes pre-equipped with a lot of cool dog toys—plus the most awesome dog bed I’ve ever seen, although I have a hunch Guy will be sleeping on top of the bed in the orgone room, with Crash, once he’s big enough to jump up there.

“My guess,” says Crash, “is this photo of Pam was likely shot in a room overlooking downtown Seattle. But the stuff in front, with Conye, could’ve been shot in a studio.”

“Actually, now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure I saw that exact same couch in Conye’s apartment here in New York.”

“That’d make sense. It could be an old publicity photo. But Pam’s shot is recent. She’s still wearing the same clothes she had on when she was kidnapped. It’s like someone’s sending you a message.”

“So I guess it’s time for me to visit Seattle.”

“Yeah, I’d say so. I’ll stay here, with the dogs, on the off chance that Pam is still in New York. But you should at least go drop in on Conye at Bad Animals Studio and see what he has to say for himself. I’ll pay for your plane ticket. Just let me make a few phone calls. My old landlord might have an unrented apartment you can stay in.”

“You’re still in touch with that guy?”

“Bob Sasso? Yeah. We don’t exactly call each other every week, but he’ll remember me. We both had some pretty trippy experiences in that old building of his while I was living there. You remember that place, don’t you? The Vanderbilts owned it before Bob bought it.”

“And it was haunted. I remember,” I say. “That basement scared the shit out of me every time I went down there to wash my socks.”

“I helped Bob find an exorcist who put things right for him. His property value probably shot up by a few hundred grand that day. So Bob made me promise to call him if I ever needed a favor.”

“Jesus. Have you ever lived in a place where things *didn’t* get weird on you?”

“When you’re interested in weird shit, weird shit happens to you,” Crash says with a shrug as he fires up his computer to do a search for airline tickets and Bob Sasso’s phone number.



“Oh, now this is interesting...” says Crash, looking at his computer monitor.

“What?” I ask him.

“My Anonymous friends finally tracked down Clonenhoof’s IP address. His emails were being re-routed through a CIA cloud hub in Denver, which is why they were having so much trouble tracing the source. But they picked up the trail again on the other side and found out that Clonenhoof’s IP address is somewhere inside Glamazon’s office complex in Seattle.”

“So that’s one more reason for me to be making the trip out to Seattle.”

“Yeah, but this can’t be right. Someone snuck a WiFi sniffer into Glamazon to find the specific network device that had been sending Clonenhoof’s emails. Supposedly, it’s a Flame Phone that belongs to the Big Kahuna himself—*Jeb fucking Beezos.*”

“No way!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought: *No way* is Jeb Beezos dumb enough to use a device that’s not tethered to an unhackable private server with SSL or some better form of encryption for his

emails. He can't be *that* in love with his screwed-up Flame Phone, can he?"

"You wouldn't think so," I say.

"Not unless there's a good reason to believe it's safe to use the WiFi network inside Glamazon."

"Which it's not, obviously—if that's what he thinks."

"I'm thinking the WiFi sniffer must have made a mistake. But *someone* inside Glamazon could still be your Clonenhoof, so I'll have my guys stay on it. Maybe by the time you get out there, they'll have a real person you can talk to—because I'm pretty sure you can't just walk up to Jeb Beezos' house and ring his doorbell."

"*Uhm, no.*" I watch as Crash taps out a quick email message. When he hits Send (with its fake computer whoosh sound effect), I hear a ping shortly thereafter, alerting him to a new round of email.

"Hey, does Pam have an FTP site?" Crash asks me over his shoulder as I crouch to pet little Guy.

"I think so... yeah," I say. "I'm pretty sure it comes free with her Bluehost account."

"Remember that encrypted file I found on her iPhone? My cryptologist friend finally cracked it."

"Yeah? So what was in it?" I pick up Guy and walk over to Crash's computer so I can see what he's up to.

"It's a note from Pam to you," Crash says, "along with a set of instructions that explains how to access her FTP site."

"A note for me?" I lean over him to read the decrypted document that the cryptographer forwarded to Crash's inbox. Crash gets out of his chair and tells me to sit down, so I can get a better look at it. As soon as I'm settled in, Guy sits up in my lap and pretends to read the note with me:

Dear Derek,

This is just a precaution and I hope you never have any reason to find it. I wouldn't even be doing this if Clonenhoof hadn't been freaking me out. I used to think that if I ever got famous enough to have a stalker, I might find it kind of flattering. But Clonenhoof's not that kind of stalker.

I haven't been sleeping much for the last couple of weeks, so I stayed up late and finished our Archons and antimimon video right before we left for New York. I wanted to get your take on it and do one final pass to smooth out the rough edges before I posted it to UTube, but there wasn't enough time. So I just uploaded it to my FTP site for safekeeping, thinking I'd pick it up again after we got back. But trips always make me nervous. I start worrying about the plane crashing or someone breaking into my apartment and stealing all my computers. And now, with Clonenhoof threatening me, I thought I might rest easier if I left this note for you, just in case.

You'll need a PGP key to access my FTP site. It's encrypted in that photo of you getting a blowjob from the shark that I posted to Instagram and sent to your email account. "Fearless sex addict and my heroic beau, Derek Swannson. He's the key to my soon-to-be-released video about Archons and Loosh." Get it? You must have gotten it, if you're reading this.

If something happens to me, post the video. Consider it my last will and testament. Everything I have is yours, because ever since I met you, you've been my everything. I hope I've been your everything, too.

I LOVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN EVER KNOW

XOXO

Pam

(FTP access info appended below)

“Oh man... it’s like she knew,” I say.

“It almost seems scripted,” Crash observes, reading over my shoulder. “Are you sure this is from Pam?”

“What do you mean? *Of course* it’s from Pam. How could it *not* be Pam?”

“It could be an elaborate hoax. I’m not saying it is—and I don’t know why anyone would go to all the trouble—but an intelligence agency could have planted that note on her iPhone.”

“I guess there’s only one way to find out...” I say, pissed that my brother would even dare suggest that some NSA stooge was responsible for my girlfriend’s tender declaration of love and everythingness. “Let’s get into Pam’s FTP site and download that video.”

“Sure. Let’s do that,” says Crash. “But I hope you don’t mind if I spend a little time scanning for viruses and malware before we open the file. Deal?”

“Deal, you paranoid bastard,” I say, giving him a rough bro handshake.

“Yeah, okay, so maybe I’m a little paranoid,” Crash admits. “But the question you should be asking yourself is:

“Why is Pam smiling in that fake picture on the cover of *VanityWeek*?”



After the better part of an hour, we finally get Pam’s completed video open in QuickTime Player on Crash’s computer. We skip past the sections we’ve already seen until we arrive at the new stuff she put together about Archons and antimimon. I get a lump in my throat (and another below the belt) when I see Pam back at her stripper pole in just a royal blue thong and a few strategically placed scarves. She’s looking lovelier than ever.

“So now that we’re all up to speed on Archontic possession, what else can the Gnostics teach us about the Archons?” Pam

asks, addressing the video camera. “Well, for starters, the Archons are creatively bankrupt. Hannah Arendt was onto something with that stuff about Eichmann and the banality of evil. The Gnostics tell us the Archons are inferior to humans because they lack *ennoia*—or creative will—and *epinoia*—or creative imagination. Which means they can only imitate, never create. But they’re really good at fooling us. The Sethian Gnostic text, the *Apocryphon of John*, says the Archons delight in deception. Their preferred method is called *antimimon*—or counter mimicry.”

Wasn’t that almost exactly what I said to Skelly in Robin’s restaurant on the night we saw the cougar? Does Pam have an eidetic memory, like Crash? Or did she happen to record our entire conversation? Maybe the Archons aren’t the only ones with creativity issues—although, to be fair, I was just repeating ideas that the Gnostics had arrived at first.

“Let’s explore antimimon, shall we?” Pam says like a seasoned seductress—or a female espionage agent setting a honeytrap. Her nipples are hard beneath her scarves and she’s showing a lot of the underboob cleavage that’s made her famous.

Damn, she looks good! I shouldn’t be getting mentally snippy about my girlfriend’s lack of creativity when she’s sculpted herself into a living work of art. As she fades to black, a quotation appears on the screen in white Helvetica Neue:

**Anyone who has the power to make you
believe absurdities has the power to make
you commit injustices.**

—Voltaire, *Questions sur les miracles*

It looks like Pam went to the original source for my paraphrased Voltaire quote. *Good for her!*

Marcus Fjellström's "The Disjointed" is on the soundtrack: grim fairy tale music interspersed with spooky overdubbed passes from combat helicopters and rocket launchers—perfect for a walk through a dark forest where a witch in a candy cottage cooks and eats children. A rapid-fire montage cycles through screenshots of civilian war casualties. It's the most brutal, atrocious stuff imaginable—only we don't have to imagine it, because it already happened and Pam has put the proof right in front of us. Dead women and children, spattered blood and scattered bones, bombed out villages and schools. These are the direct consequences of war—the consequences we don't want to think about, just like we don't want to think about how some poor cow got a bolt shot through its skull to supply the barbequed hamburgers we eat on the Fourth of July. No beautiful and unique snowflake ever feels responsible for the avalanche, right?

We hear Pam saying in voice-over: "The Archons might not be able to create anything new, but they can copy things that already exist and then invert their original meaning or purpose. It's like Orwellian *doublethink* mixed up with reality TV. It's where we get ideas like the one about how pre-emptive war in the Middle East was going to promote world peace. Let's put that lie to rest right now. You can't start a war to prevent a war. The Global Terrorism Index, produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace, has determined that global terrorist incidents have *significantly increased* since the U.S. started its War on Terror campaign back in 2001. According to a United Nations report, one out of every 122 people has been forcibly displaced by war and persecution in the 21st-century. But that's how the Archons like it. Al Qaeda is supposed to be our enemy, but the CIA has been supplying them with lawyers, guns, and money the whole damn time. We're supposed to be promoting democracy, but in the wake of the Arab Spring the U.S. and its allies, like Saudi Arabia, acted as counter-revolutionary forces against the grassroots movements seeking democratic

alternatives to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Even within our own country, the USA PATRIOT Act has eroded the very liberties that the original American patriots fought for during the founding of this country. ‘War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength’ the Archons and their possessed puppet leaders would have you believe—and the Gnostics were warning us about it 1800 years before Orwell.”

Again, we see jug-eared George W. Bush saying with squinty-eyed bravado: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Then a two-part set of title cards appears on the screen, one following the other, as Fjellström’s music continues to weave its eerie spell:

It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy,

thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character.

—Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*

The soundtrack segues into an instrumental version of the Siouxsie & The Banshees song “Kiss Them for Me” as several short video clips play across the screen:

Jeb Bush, at the National Security Forum, says, “Taking out Saddam Hussein turned out to be a pretty good deal.” Donald Trump tells Omarosa she’s fired on *The Celebrity Apprentice*. Barack Obama feigns contrition on behalf of the CIA for their post-9/11 interrogation methods, admitting: “We tortured some folks.” Hillary Clinton touts her husband’s new \$30 billion crime bill at Keene State College in 1996 while spewing fear porn about young black men: “They’re not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called ‘super-predators.’ No conscience, no empathy. We can talk about how they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heel.”

Hillary’s speech ends on a recent still photo of her sharing a hug with America’s go-to celebrity war criminal, Henry Kissinger. Another title card appears as that image fades to black:

The illegal we do immediately. The unconstitutional takes a little longer.

—Henry Kissinger, during a 1975 meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Melih Esenbel

Back at her stripper pole, Pam dances to the Siouxsie & The Banshees tune as she peers into the lens of the video camera like she’s staring into the eyes of her lover (I know the look...): “So who are the *real* ‘super-predators?’” she asks with a rhetorical flourish. “Young black kids? I don’t think so... although that’s the group that was disproportionately sent to prison while Bill

Clinton was in office. Clinton presided over the biggest increase in federal and state prison inmates of any President in U.S. history. You probably didn't know that—because he likes to eat dinner in Harlem and play the sax. But the Clintons helped enact the most arbitrary, racist, devastating criminal laws in U.S. history, like the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity for crack versus cocaine. Black people aren't any more likely to use or sell drugs than white people, but they're much more likely to be arrested for them. After the Clinton administration's eight years were up, prison admissions for drug offenses by African-Americans were 26 times higher than they'd been in 1983.

“The War on Drugs was started by that paragon of virtue, Richard M. Nixon, to crack down on his perceived enemies—the hippies and the Black Panthers. Then it ramped up with Reagan, the Bushes, and the Clintons. In reality, the War on Drugs has always been a war on minorities and the poor—and a war on the pot-smoking pacifists in America. A war that allows for increased police intrusion into our private lives and the suppression of our civil liberties. The War on Drugs also serves as an effective smokescreen for CIA-sponsored drug trafficking. Just ask Gary Webb—he knows. Oh, wait... he's dead. He couldn't get hired as a journalist after he broke the story on how the CIA had been flooding black urban neighborhoods with cheap crack during Iran-Contra. The major media conglomerates didn't want you knowing anything about that. And after the Clintons overturned the Fairness Doctrine for them, those same media conglomerates didn't waste any time merging into a tight oligarchy with billions to spend on manipulated, fabricated, mind-blitzing propaganda.”

“That's my girlfriend, puppy,” I say with pride to Guy, still in my lap. “What d'you think?”

Guy clamps down on my finger and gently gnaws it. Teething.

“She's making some good points,” Crash says, speaking for Guy, perhaps.

“*‘Fair is foul and foul is fair.’* That's Shakespeare's description of antimimon for you,” says Pam, quoting from *Macbeth*. “I'd rather not keep throwing shade on the Clintons, but right now

Hillary—aka the ‘The Lady Macbeth of Little Rock’—appears to have the best shot at becoming our next U.S. President. So I think it’s only fair that we look at her record of foul play. The argument has been made that if I don’t vote for Hillary Clinton, then I don’t deserve to call myself a feminist, but that’s a monumental pile of she-wolf shit. Women aren’t exempt from Archontic possession. That phrase—*Archontic possession*—is easy to make fun of, but the social behaviors associated with it are also easy to observe:

“Hillary has been an enabler of the vampire squid tactics of Goldman Sachs and the rest of Wall Street for most of her adult life. It was her husband, after all, who repealed the Glass-Steagall Act and other New Deal reforms. The Clinton-led bipartisan deregulation of the banking industry allowed banks to start gambling with their depositors’ money, leading to the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the financial coup d’état of 2008. But Hillary wasn’t bothered by any of that. She and Bill are now worth around 110 million dollars, give or take a few million. She actually had the gall to blame consumer borrowers for the housing bubble that popped in 2008—which is kind of like blaming passengers for dying because they bought tickets on a discount airline without knowing that the planes were serviced by a crew of drunken monkeys. There’s no reason to believe Hillary will ever call for the ‘too-big-to-jail’ bankers to be sent to prison for the crimes they committed while engineering the housing bubble and the financial crisis. She’s made so much money from the speaking fees paid to her by Goldman Sachs and other financial industry lobbyists that those fees are now known on Wall Street as ‘Hillary’s Goldman handcuffs.’

“She’s a corporatist, an imperialist, and a war hawk. She’s been a vicious champion for endless war and the war machine. Lobbyists for the military-industrial-intelligence complex love Hillary—always voting for pre-emptive war in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, telling us we need to keep ramping up the defense budget. The Federal Reserve has reported that 52% of Americans can’t raise \$400 without selling their possessions or borrowing the money, but the U.S. government continues to

extract \$3300 a year from every working American to spend on military defense and intelligence gathering activities. We're talking about over \$600 *billion* a year. Actually, that figure is probably higher if you factor in the Pentagon's black budget, which runs into the trillions with no attempt to keep tabs on it at all. During the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, the U.S. Treasury consistently refused to produce audited financial statements, as required by law since 1995. Between 1998 and 2002 alone, over \$4 trillion went missing from the federal government. Donald Rumsfeld admitted that the Pentagon was responsible for losing track of at least \$2.3 trillion. You recall when he made that big announcement, right?

"The day before Al Qaeda's 'Big Wedding' on 9/11.

"But that's all relatively recent history. To get a clearer picture of Hillary Clinton's developing character, let's go back even further. Back to those halcyon days in Arkansas during the 1980s, when her philandering horndog husband was the state's youngest governor, *ever*, and Mena Intermountain Municipal Airport—just 140 miles west of Little Rock—was one of the CIA's main hubs for international drug smuggling."

"*Holy shit!* She knows about the Octopus!" I exclaim.

"I kind of suspected she did," says Crash. "That's why I told you about it. I reconstructed her iPhone's recent browsing history. It touched on all kinds of Octopus-related themes."

"Did she ever talk to you about it?"

"No. Let's just listen."

Pam has plenty more to say: "Admitted drug smuggler and alleged CIA operative, Adler 'Barry' Seal, maintained a fleet of cargo planes at the Mena, Arkansas airport from 1982 to 1986. FAA registration records have confirmed that the aircraft used in Seal's smuggling operation had been previously owned by Air America—widely known as a CIA front company involved in drug trafficking in the Asia-Pacific region. Seal was a former member of Army Special Forces with ties to the CIA that went back to at least the early 1960s. In court and in congressional

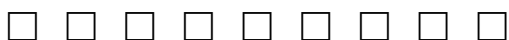
testimony, it's been established that the CIA helped Seal install hidden cameras in one of his C-123 cargo planes to use in a sting operation against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in 1984, so the Reagan administration could drum up support for the Contras. Later, one of those same Seal-owned C-123 cargo planes—this one nicknamed *Fat Lady*—was shot down over Nicaragua with a load of untraceable weapons destined for the Contras. Documents found on-board the crashed cargo plane, seized by the Sandinistas, included flight logs linking the plane with Area 51—the top secret airbase in Nevada that's used for developing black project weapons systems and experimental aircraft—including reverse-engineered Alien Replica Vehicles, if you believe *some* people, like John Lear and Bob Lazar.”

“Oh, man! She just connected the Octopus to Area 51 and UFOs!” I have to laugh. “Go, Pam!”

“Remember, *Wackenbut* controls security at Area 51,” Crash reminds me.

Pam continues right over us, saying: “The only survivor of *Fat Lady*’s crash, a 45-year-old former Marine named Eugene Hasenfus, told the Sandinistas that he and two of his coworkers—Max Gomez and Ramon Medina—had been working for the CIA. He later retracted that statement after he was returned to America at the request of U.S. Senator Chris Dodd—but the damage had been done. International news organizations started looking into what would soon become known as the Iran-Contra affair. One of the questions they should have been asking was: *How much did the Clintons know about the crimes of Mena?* The answer—according to CIA-asset-turned-whistleblower, Terry Reed, and investigative journalist, Daniel Hopsicker—is: *A LOT*. In exchange for his willingness to look the other way on Mena, Bill Clinton was given a big assist from the CIA in his meteoric rise to the presidency. You can’t tell me Hillary doesn’t know a single thing about that.

“Are you fucking with us, Hillary? Not for much longer.”



“Okay, let’s pause that right here,” says Crash, hitting the Play/Pause button on the QuickTime menu bar.

“What for?” I ask him. “She was just getting on a roll.”

“There’s something I forgot to tell you about Fred Crisman and the Maury Island Incident. And now—if Pam is about to go where I think she’s going with this—it might be important for you to know about it.”

“Okay. If it’s really that important,” I say.

“It is. It should help clarify a few things for you. Remember how I said the Maury Island sighting might have been a hoax? Well, it’s more complicated than that. People died. The first plane crash in U.S. Air Force history was connected to Maury Island. That *Man in Black* episode I told you about was only *the start* of all the weirdness.”

“And that was plenty weird to begin with,” I say. “So what else happened?”

“I kind of hate to jump so far back in history,” Crash says, “but here it is: Toward the end of July, 1947, Kenneth Arnold was in Tacoma investigating the Maury Island Incident for *Amazing Stories*, remember? He’d flown his own single-engine plane there and he had a \$150 movie camera with him. Along the way, he’d captured some shaky film footage of another squadron of UFOs—smaller ones this time, only dots on the film, even though they were less than 500 yards away from him. Arnold estimated they were only 30 inches in diameter. Coincidentally, while Guy Banister was working for the FBI around that same time, he took custody of a 30-inch crashed disc in Twin Falls, Idaho, that matched Arnold’s description. The local press was told that four local boys had made the flying mini-saucer out of parts from an old phonograph, but witnesses said the weird disc didn’t look like anything that a gang of kids could’ve put together.”

“Not even if the kids were ‘super-predators’ with no conscience or empathy?” I ask Crash, troweling on the irony.

“Oh, well, maybe then... but only if they were African-American,” he says, laying it on just as thick. “I don’t know how many black kids you could find in Idaho around that time—not many, I’d guess—but 1947 was a banner year for seeing UFOs. There were hundreds of local newspaper accounts from people reporting weird objects in the sky, and not just around the big events, like Kenneth Arnold’s sighting, the Roswell Crash, and Maury Island. The sightings came from all over, from Washington all the way down to New Mexico and Arizona.”

“They still do,” I say. I’ve certainly seen enough UFO videos on UTube to attest to that.

“That’s kind of my point,” says Crash. “Since 1947, there’s been a slew of UFO reports in the U.S.—more all the time, it seems, if you’ve been paying attention.”

“Right,” I confirm. “Over 15,000 reported sightings a year in the U.S. and Canada alone, according to the latest statistics. That’s about 40 sightings per day—and maybe only one in ten people bother to report a UFO sighting to any official recording agency in the first place. So that’s *a whole lot* of sightings. But most people still write off UFOs as a joke—or a hoax.”

Crash adds: “And among the researchers who *do* take the subject seriously, like Richard Dolan and Jacques Vallee, no consensus has been reached on what the UFOs are doing here. Are they experimental military aircraft? Some of them are, for sure, but other sightings seem to break all known laws of physics and aerodynamics. Objects are seen hovering motionless in the sky and then shooting off at speeds that have been clocked at thousands of miles per hour. They make right angle turns in a split-second at those insane speeds, which would generate the kind of G-forces that would kill any human pilot. And then there are those giant black triangles—which have been seen all over the world, passing through the sky at speeds so slow that airflow dynamics alone couldn’t possibly keep them aloft.”

“Maybe they’re blimps,” I suggest, although I know better. The black triangles are truly in a weird class of their own. I wrote about them in *Crash Gordon and the Revelations from Big Sur*.

“Whatever they are, we’re not being given the full story. Too many people have seen the black triangles to dismiss them as swamp gas, stealth bombers, or a product of mass hysteria. But let’s get back to Kenneth Arnold.... When he showed up in Tacoma, all the hotels he called from the airport were booked. Getting desperate, he called one of the more upscale hotels in town—the Linnard-Western Winthrop—even though it was outside his budget. To his surprise, the clerk at the Winthrop informed him that Room 502 had already been reserved in his name. With no other hotel rooms available, Arnold decided not to tell the clerk that he hadn’t made the reservation. He went straight to the Winthrop and checked in.”

“I think I remember this part: the room was bugged, right?”

“Right. Arnold called up Harold Dahl as soon as he was settled in. Dahl didn’t want to talk about the UFOs he’d seen over Maury Island. The Man in Black had already convinced him that he’d be better off just forgetting the whole thing. But Kenneth Arnold was persuasive. He was an honest, All-American guy who’d already taken some serious flak for his own UFO sighting at Mt. Rainier. So Dahl eventually caved in after half an hour of stalling and agreed to meet Arnold at his hotel room.”

“Kinky. And they were being recorded that whole time?”

“Apparently. The next day a newspaper reporter named Ted Morello called up Kenneth Arnold and told him, verbatim, what had been said in Room 502 while Arnold was interviewing Harold Dahl—and later, Fred Crisman. Ted Morello was working for United Press International at the time—the same propaganda-spewing mass media company that was later bought by Dr. Earl Brian, the PROMIS software pirate.”

“So we’re back in Octopus territory. Do you think Crisman made the reservation and bugged the room himself?”

“That’s the most likely explanation. After talking to Crisman about it, Kenneth Arnold came away with the impression that he was being played. But he wanted to be sure, so he called in two Air Force A-2 Intelligence investigators that he’d met when he

was talking about his own UFO sighting: Captain William Lee Davidson and First Lieutenant Frank Mercer Brown.”

“Those are the two guys who died?”

“Yeah, but first they met with Fred Crisman and Kenneth Arnold in Room 502. Harold Dahl refused to talk to them—too freaked out by the Man in Black to risk an encounter with military intelligence agents. Crisman, however, already knew Lieutenant Brown—they were old friends—so he sat down and told them the whole story. He showed them some of the UFO slag he’d picked up from Maury Island. He even speculated that the UFOs might have been German aerospace technology captured from the Nazis. Davidson and Brown wanted to take some samples back to their Air Force base, so Crisman gave them a Kellogg’s Corn Flakes box full of UFO slag around midnight, right before their B-25 took off from McChord Field. Harold Dahl had given Kenneth Arnold a letter to pass along to the investigators explaining that the UFOs were piloted by aliens that were ‘less dense’ than human pilots, but Arnold was too embarrassed to hand it over to them. At that point, he was almost certain that Crisman and Dahl’s story was a hoax.”

“So Crisman was pushing the idea that the Nazis had UFOs—or their own reverse-engineered alien technology. I’ve heard that one before. Not sure I believe it, though.”

“But you know about Operation Paperclip, right?”

“Of course. That’s the scheme Allen Dulles cooked up with Nazi General Reinhard Gehlen, using the Office of Strategic Services and the Counter Intelligence Corps to smuggle thousands of Nazi scientists and war criminals into the U.S. in direct contradiction to presidential orders. That’s how we got Wernher von Braun, Hubertus Strughold, General Walter Dornberger, and all those Mengele-inspired sadists who pitched in on MKULTRA.”

That’s something else I’ve written about before. In my first book, I had Lloyd unpack his theory about how the Nazi ideology of the Paperclip scientists had acted as a psychic contagion, infecting the quasi-autonomous hive mind—or *egregore*—of the CIA. The Germans even had a word for that

sort of egregore transmutation brought on by an ideological virus. They called it *Weltanschauungskrieg*—roughly translated as *worldview warfare*.

Correlation doesn't always equal causation, but it's interesting to note that the CIA was established when President Truman signed the National Security Act into law right after the UFOs went wild during the summer of 1947. Many—if not most—of the early CIA agents were recruited from the OSS (so packed full of members of the East Coast financial elite that the acronym was jokingly said to stand for Oh-So-Social). So, essentially, what you had with the CIA was a bunch of Nazis and Wall Street investment bankers and lawyers working together.

What could possibly go wrong?

“Those rumors about Nazi UFOs have never gone away,” Crash says. “There was some talk that plans for aerospace technology that was ‘not-of-this-world’ had been found during Operation Lusty—the U.S. Army Air Force mission to capture a ‘black list’ of secrets related to German Luftwaffe technology. Everyone knows the Nazis were up to some weird shit in those days. They started out as defenders of the Thule Society, which was basically a mob of jackbooted occultists with machine guns. Then there was that freak Himmler and his adventures with the *Abnenerbe*: the expeditions to consult pagan witches in Finland and search for Vril lizards in Tibet, the endless attempts to contact otherworldly entities and harness supernatural forces during black magick ceremonies at their creepy castle in Westphalia. Then there was that weirdness with Wernher von Braun’s mentor, Doctor Hermann Oberth, and *Die Glocke*—or the Nazi Bell technology—along with all the reports of the ‘Foo Fighters’ that Allied pilots encountered during World War II. And don’t even get me started on the miles and miles of tunnels that the Nazis dug under Książ Castle in the Owl Mountains of southwestern Poland... an elevator inside the castle was supposed to have led to an underground city known by the code name *Riese*, with a honeymoon suite specifically designed for Hitler; also, a Polish journalist named Igor Witkowski said that ‘rounded, experimental flying vehicles’ were seen at Książ Castle during the war.

“Pam talks a lot about how the Archons are possessing people in her new video, but if there was ever a group of people working to serve the Archontic agenda, it was the Nazis. You have to wonder if the SS leaders made a Faustian pact, promising the Archons all the Loosh they wanted in exchange for futuristic technology that’d give the Nazis a shot at world domination.”

“I hope they got a free bag of fries with that,” I say, “because the world domination thing didn’t exactly pan out.”

“Well, that’s debatable. If you take the long view—the *worldview warfare* view—the Nazi egregore still lives on in crypto-fascist organizations like the CIA and the neocons.”

“I thought the neocons were pro-Israel—borderline Zionists, even—with brainy Jewish guys like Irving Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz calling the shots.”

“True... but just like the Nazis, they’re aligned with the Archontic agenda. Even during the war, ordinary Germans and Jews had much more in common with each other than they had with the Nazis leaders—or later, with leaders of the Mossad or the neocons. Ordinary people have no desire to kill other people that aren’t like them. That xenophobic lust for blood is an Archontic trait.”

“So what we’re *really* talking about is a crypto-fascist Archon-influenced egregore, rather than a specifically Nazi egregore.”

“That might be a better way of putting it—although 99 percent of the people on this planet probably don’t know what an egregore is in the first place, so maybe we should just bag that term and start referring to the phenomenon as Archontic possession.”

“Yeah, like everyone knows what *that* means...” I say.

“The readers of your books will know,” Crash reminds me. “And a whole lot more people will know after they watch Pam’s video on UTube.”

“Are you saying we should post that?”

“*Of course* we should post it. Isn’t that what Pam wanted? She told you to post it in her note.”

“Don’t you think we should at least watch the rest of it first?”

“Sure. But before we do that, let me wrap up what I was telling you about Fred Crisman, because I’m almost sure it relates to what Pam will be talking about.”

“Okay, *fine*. Go ahead: finish your story about that asshole, Crisman,” I say with an exaggerated huff.

“Okay, I can tell you’re not interested,” says Crash, “so I’ll keep it short: About an hour after Captain Davidson and Lieutenant Brown left McChord Field with their Kellogg’s Corn Flakes box full of flying saucer slag, their B-25 crashed. Some members of the crew managed to parachute to safety before the plane went down, but Davidson and Brown perversely remained at the controls and died when the plane dove into the ground near Kelso, Washington. They’d been flying back to McChord Field for Air Force Day—a celebration honoring the Air Force’s first day as an independent branch of the U.S. military. So, as it turned out, the Air Force’s first UFO-related disaster occurred on the very first day of its existence. Fred Crisman called Kenneth Arnold that same morning to tell him about the crash. A few days later, Crisman was hustled aboard an Air Force transport plane and flown to a military prison in Alaska.”

“What the fuck?” I say. “Did they think Crisman sabotaged Davidson and Brown’s plane?”

“That’s what Ted Morello from UPI insinuated. He called up Kenneth Arnold the next day and said his anonymous source had told him that a 20 millimeter cannon had blown the B-25 out of the sky to prevent Crisman’s Corn Flakes box from reaching its intended destination.”

“What’d the Air Force have to say about that?”

“They blamed the crash on a failed exhaust collector ring on the plane’s left engine. Davidson and Brown’s bodies were found in the wreckage, but the Kellogg’s Corn Flakes box full of UFO slag was never recovered. In the aftermath, the Air Force made it official policy to report similar classified UFO material to the Command Chief of the Pentagon’s Foreign Technology

Division—the same division that Lieutenant Colonel Philip J. Corso wrote about in his 1997 book, *The Day After Roswell*.”

“Oh yeah. That’s one wild book,” I say. I’ve read it. Corso claimed the Foreign Technology Division was responsible for doling out reverse-engineered alien technology that provided us with such modern marvels as lasers, fiber optics, IC chips, and high energy particle accelerators like the Tevatron and CERN’s Large Hadron Collider (which, any day now, could screw up a Higg’s boson by zapping it with too many giga-electron-volts, which might cause space and time to collapse as the universe undergoes “catastrophic vacuum decay” and gets sucked down a black hole. So enjoy every sandwich, like Warren Zevon said on *Late Show with David Letterman* right before he died, because according to Stephen Hawking, “This could happen at any time and we wouldn’t see it coming.”)

“I’m not sure what to think about Corso,” Crash says. “He started out with the Counter Intelligence Corps in Rome during World War II, where he was helping out the Vatican with the Nazi Rat Lines—so we can assume he was part of Operation Paperclip. Then, during the Korean War, he was Chief of Special Projects for the Far East Command’s Intelligence Division—so we can also safely assume he was familiar with CIA drug trafficking coming out of the Golden Triangle. He did four years on the staff of Eisenhower’s National Security Council while the Dulles brothers were ramping up the Cold War, and then he was appointed Chief of the Foreign Technology Division in 1961.”

“So he was about as deep into that Deep State shit as anyone ever gets,” I conclude.

“Yeah, aside from mummified old fascists like Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller,” Crash appends. “So then the question is: Why did Corso write that crazy book?”

“You think it was deliberate disinfo?”

“That’s one possibility. But there’s another possibility I’m hoping Pam will address in her video. This might be the right time to watch the rest of it.”

TAPEWORM ECONOMICS AND THE BREAKAWAY CIVILIZATION

“Now I’m going to introduce you to someone I really admire,” Pam says in a gorgeous, screen-filling close-up, “someone who stands on the opposite side of the fence from all the grifter politicians like Hillary Clinton in this upside down world.” Pam’s image shifts over to the right side of a split video screen while an older woman with chin-length blonde hair appears on the left, wearing a simple but elegant gray silk blouse. “Financial expert Catherine Austin Fitts is joining me for a late-night chat and I can’t tell you how happy I am to be talking to her.”

“It’s my pleasure, Pam,” Catherine says. “I love your show.” She’s speaking to Pam via Skype, so the view of her is from desk level, seated in front of a wall of weighty, hardbound books.

“For those of you who don’t already know, Catherine served as Assistant Secretary of Housing in the first Bush Administration. Then her company, Hamilton Securities Group, acted as lead financial advisor to the Federal Housing Administration during Bill Clinton’s time in office.

“For over twenty years now, Catherine has been blowing the whistle on how financial terrorists, working within our own government, have been gutting America’s middle-class in what amounts to a leveraged buyout of our entire country. She was sounding warning bells on fraud in the housing market for well

over a decade before the 2008 housing collapse occurred. She also documented how billions of dollars were going missing from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development during the 1990s. Catherine was personally targeted for exposing that systemic fraud and had to spend millions of dollars defending herself against eleven years of legal harassment from HUD and their corrupt cronies, Ervin & Associates, during the Clinton Administration and the second Bush Administration.

“Now she’s back—as publisher of the *Solari Report* and managing member of Solari Investment Advisory Services—providing the details we need to know about the financial coup d’état that went into overdrive in 2008 with the twelve trillion dollars in taxpayer-funded bailouts that we handed over to the very same institutions that caused the financial crisis in the first place. She’s here to help us understand where all that money went. So Catherine, where do we start?”

“Well, Pam, we could start anywhere, but if you want to go back to the very beginning...” Catherine’s Skype video feed takes over the entire screen at this point, with Pam’s simultaneous video feed reduced to a small box in the lower right corner, “I was ten years old when the combined action of HUD housing investment and heroin trafficking destroyed my West Philadelphia neighborhood, draining the equity from our homes and businesses. Many people left. Those who stayed were embroiled in the increasing stress of what happens as neighborhoods deteriorate into crime and decay. I decided then that I would learn how money worked. I was too young to understand fully how the combination of HUD investment and drugs could move control and ownership from the many people who lived in a community to a few people who lived outside the community, but I arrived at that understanding later, after I became an investment banker.”

“During the eighties,” Pam says from her little Skype box, “you were the first woman to be promoted to Managing Director and member of the board of directors at the Wall Street investment bank Dillon, Read & Company. How did you rise so high in an elitist Old Boys’ network like that?”

“I managed the firm’s large municipal and government clients,” Catherine answers. “I spent four years recapitalizing New York City’s subway, bus, and commuter rail systems. I also organized the financing for hundreds of millions in renovations to the infrastructures of New York and New Jersey. I regularly handled hundreds of millions of dollars in transactions.”

“So I assume you were doing all right for yourself back then.”

“I was. I also helped make tens of millions of dollars in profits for my firm—and I raised tens of thousands of dollars for the George Bush Presidential campaign in 1988. Nicholas Brady, my partner and boss at Dillon Read, was appointed as George Bush’s Treasury Secretary.”

“Pardon me for saying this, but that sounds kind of skuzzy,” says Pam, never one to pull her punches. “All those Wall Street sharks that get handed plum government jobs like the Treasury Secretary... it seems like a conflict of interest.”

Catherine laughs at that. “Well, Pam, I’ll admit, I was a Wall Street insider and a political insider—or so I thought. I was successful at Dillon Read because I created new investment models that helped ordinary people while making a profit. I thought ‘outside the box.’ When Iran-Contra came and went, I was oblivious. I had no idea about the drugs. It never entered my mind. Yet today I’m convinced that the illegal drug trade—the enormous cheap capital it generates, and the CIA’s role as enforcer/protector for the profits of that trade—well, it’s a dominant factor in the economy of this country. It’s destroying American culture and it’s utterly out of control. As an investor and banker and former Cabinet level appointee, I’m telling you this is true.”

Pam says, “I’ve often heard you refer to the drug trade as a key part of ‘tapeworm economics.’ As I understand it—and please correct me if I’m wrong—when we talk about tapeworm economics we’re talking about an economy with two classes of people: The insiders and the outsiders. The swindlers and the swindled. The people who make the rules and therefore benefit

from them—the insiders—are constantly subsidized at the expense of the outsiders—the people who don't make the rules and end up getting screwed by them. Like a tapeworm, a parasitic worm that feeds off its host, the insiders engineer the economy to drain it for their benefit... to fatten the tapeworm."

"That's right," Catherine says, nodding her head. "While many of us hate 'the system,' what we often forget is that we keep honoring and supporting the people and institutions that are implementing the system when we interact and transact with them in our day-to-day lives. Enjoying the financial benefits and other perks that come from that intimate support ensures our continued complicity and contributes to fueling the very system we say we hate. Before we can collectively change that system, we'll need to reach some basic consensus about how the economic tapeworm works parasitically in our lives—how it's killing us while we blindly feed it. A tapeworm injects chemicals into a host that causes the host to crave what's good for the tapeworm. In America, we despair over our deterioration, but we always crave the next injection of tapeworm chemicals." Catherine sighs and rolls her eyes. "Unfortunately, I didn't figure that out right away. My evolution came slowly."

Pam says, "Well, like Upton Sinclair said: 'It's difficult to understand something when your salary depends on you not understanding it.' That's a paraphrase, but you get what I'm saying, right? I also seem to recall some obscure adage about not biting the hand that feeds you."

"Of course. In 1989, when I was named Assistant Secretary of Housing / FHA Commissioner under Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp, I managed over 300 billion dollars of mortgage insurance, mortgages, and properties of the Federal Housing Administration—and, as Commissioner, I advised the Secretary on another one trillion of mortgage financing. Jack Kemp fired me in late-1990 because I wouldn't go along with the questionable political practices, which seem to be built into HUD's machinery and purpose. But I still didn't see the bigger picture."

“He fired you? I thought you quit because you couldn’t stomach the mortgage fraud and co-insurance scams you were seeing. I heard you say in another interview that by 1990 you suspected that HUD was being run as a criminal enterprise.”

“Let’s just say that Jack Kemp and I didn’t share the same values. In 1990, after leaving HUD, I started my own investment company, The Hamilton Securities Group, and I devised new and creative ways to save taxpayers billions of dollars. In 1993, Hamilton secured contracts with HUD through Secretary Henry Cisneros. Hamilton saved taxpayers billions of dollars by taking defaulted HUD housing mortgages, repackaging them, and auctioning them on the private market. Hamilton began putting wealth back into inner city projects by hiring women living in HUD housing and teaching them how to use computers to build databases on how money works in 63,000 neighborhoods throughout America. Hamilton started a data processing company—Edgewood Technology Services—with these women and they earned stock in the company. The company made money and proved the concept of what online access in communities could do to build jobs and businesses. Hamilton was extremely successful. We made millions and we saved the government billions.”

“That sounds awesome!”

“It was the fulfillment of my childhood dream, using HUD to help reverse the damage done to neighborhoods like mine when I was growing up in West Philadelphia. Hamilton also created new software and money management tools, which—for the first time ever—were able to map down to the neighborhood exactly how HUD and other federal money worked: who profited when loans defaulted, and how money came into or left a community. For example, we were often able to see where HUD was spending 150 thousand to 250 thousand per unit on apartment buildings when there was single family housing available within walking distance for 25 to 50 thousand.”

“So more bang for the taxpayers’ buck.”

“Exactly! Secretary Cisneros had been extremely supportive of our work. We had unrestricted access to rich quantities of government financial data that was supposedly public, but hard to understand. We were translating that into useable information so that people in any community could see how the money flowed through their neighborhood. We helped HUD get increasing amounts of data up on its website. As an investor for more than twenty years, I believed that it was actually more profitable for people to own their own neighborhoods and businesses and to know exactly how the money worked. The Money Maps we made were so simple to understand that they looked like comic books. But there was an unforeseen side effect for the women at Edgewood, and for Hamilton: by seeing clearly how the clean money worked, we also began to see how the dirty money worked. As it turned out, we mapped a great deal more than we knew.”

“*Uh-oh...*” Pam intones.

“In 1996, *San Jose Mercury News* reporter Gary Webb was busy writing his ‘Dark Alliance’ investigative series that connected the CIA and the Contras to the crack cocaine epidemic in Los Angeles. At the same time, I was busy using the Money Maps in a way that would help move people from government subsidies to home ownership and entrepreneurship. I was also advocating that U.S. government investment in communities should be subject to the same public disclosure rules that private companies are obligated to follow under the Securities and Exchange Commission Rules. If you’re a shareholder in a company, that company is using your money. The law requires that they use your money legally and that they do their best to protect your money and make you more. To earn money, and to do so in a fair, honest, and competitive way, federal and state laws require companies to report performance and key transactions to you, the shareholder. Every citizen is a shareholder in the government. If governments worked like they require corporations to work, they would be required to report to you, in the sunshine, exactly how the money was working in your neighborhood and you could either approve—or

disapprove—of the fairness and effectiveness of that, based upon your understanding of your own needs. That is very threatening to those who’ve used agencies like HUD as a feeding trough to pay off political cronies.”

“I’m sure. Those guys must’ve been super-pissed when it looked like their multi-billion-dollar taxpayer-financed slush fund was about to be taken away from them.”

“Not only super-pissed, but highly litigious—as I soon found out. On August 1st, 1996, I gave the keynote address at a Neighborhood Networks conference in Boston to 500 owners, managers, and tenants in private HUD housing. As part of that speech, I showed a slide of one of our Money Maps for Los Angeles.”

(The Money Map slide appears on the left side of a split screen as Catherine puts on a pair of tortoiseshell glasses to read from her 1996 keynote address, on the right.)

“As I put this slide up I made the following statement:

‘One of the products that has been most successful for our first data servicing sites, Edgewood Technology Services, has been “geo-coding” databases and mapping. I wanted to show you this map we made of Los Angeles. It’s up on the World Wide Web. Can anyone figure out where South Central L.A. is from looking at where the HUD properties are on this map? The little red dots are single-family properties that were financed by (now) defaulted HUD-held mortgages. This map was geo-coded and designed and programmed by a woman who, four months earlier, had been on unemployment compensation. She’s a tenant in HUD housing.

‘If you compare this map with the fact that the crack cocaine kingpin described in Gary Webb’s ‘Dark Alliance’ series, Freeway Ricky Ross, was known for buying up real estate along the Harbor Freeway and selling drugs throughout this exact area—the mathematical correlation is staggering. Every dot represents a HUD mortgage where the taxpayers lost money in a defaulted FHA loan and where

somebody else bought the property for pennies on the dollar. Most of those loans defaulted as the crack epidemic ravaged Los Angeles. The taxpayers bore the costs of not only the defaulted mortgages, but also the deterioration in property value, the rise in crime, and ultimately, the depopulation due to very expensive prison warehousing and welfare.

‘Exactly who bought and traded in properties throughout this area should be the subject of congressional hearings looking into corrupt HUD practices from that period and continuing to this day. I suspect that many of the same players connected to the Savings and Loan scandals—who have also been tied to Iran-Contra and CIA drug trafficking—will surface yet again.’”

Catherine’s Skype video feed goes back to full-screen as she says: “Just days after showing this first map, I received a subpoena from the Office of the Inspector General of HUD asking for extensive data and records from Hamilton Securities Group. Suddenly, the loan sales—and Hamilton—were under investigation. The HUD OIG’s actions were doubly surprising given their intimate involvement in, and positive feedback about, the loan sales program—and also because a HUD OIG audit team had just finished an audit of the loan sales program and had informed our project manager and HUD that our performance was excellent and there were no problems whatsoever.”

“No problems, that is, until you called them on their shit,” Pam clarifies.

“Well, that’s one way of putting it,” Catherine says, flashing a grin. “At the same time, we got calls from a team of reporters from *US News & World Report*. They had been assured ‘at the highest levels’ of the HUD Inspector General’s office that we were guilty of criminal action and that I would soon be indicted. The recent favorable audit disappeared. Investigators started doing interviews where they did more seed-planting than information-gathering.”

“Sounds like Operation Mockingbird coming to the CIA’s rescue again,” Pam says. “In the early 1970s, the CIA admitted to having tight working relationships with over four hundred American journalists, editors, and executives at mainstream media providers like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *CBS Evening News*, United Press International, and so on. I’m sure it’s still going on to this day.”

“No doubt,” Catherine says. “In our case, the ‘investigators’ at HUD started suggesting to reporters that bid rigging had occurred in Hamilton’s loan sales. This was just after members of the HUD IG audit team had actually sat in on one sale, and concluded that bid rigging was impossible, because in a sealed-bid auction, you can’t favor one bidder when all the bidders have access to the same information. That audit report was suppressed while the IG investigators pushed the exact opposite notion to reporters.

“Suddenly I was *persona non grata* to long-time friends and business relations in and around the government. I believe the leak campaign was far more sophisticated than something the HUD Inspector General would have been able to do on her own. It appeared that major economic and political powers had ordered that Hamilton be destroyed. More importantly, they wanted the evidence of what we knew—the maps—destroyed. That’s also why, to this day, we believe the Federal government has destroyed many, but not all, of our tools and databases.

“We didn’t realize it at the time, but I’m now convinced that in the summer of 1996, our software and mapping techniques uncovered evidence of ethnic cleansing in Los Angeles. Hamilton’s maps revealed that one of the most significant effects of the crack cocaine epidemic was that black homeowners, faced with payments on unlivable and unsellable properties, simply defaulted and fled the city to get away from the shootings and the drugs. Those properties—industrial, residential, and commercial—were scooped up for pennies on the dollar. Wouldn’t it be fascinating to know who bought the properties and how much money has been made on them since?”

"I'd sure like to know," says Pam, back in split-screen mode. "You called it 'ethnic cleansing'—which made me think of the Nazis and the Holocaust—but this ethnic cleansing was being accomplished with forcibly contrived 'debt' and drugs instead of Zyklon B and guns. Or am I oversimplifying?"

"No, that's about right. Ethnic cleansing is a bit trickier in South Central Los Angeles than it is in South Central Europe. It's essential in a 'democracy' to have people do it in a way that makes it look like they're 'doing it' to themselves. You need a socially induced suicide."

"How do you socially induce people to commit suicide?"

"You make it very attractive for their children to make money doing something illegal. Then you arrest them for it in very visible ways. (Remember the battering rams and armored trucks?) You design stories to make people blame themselves for what happened. That's how branding works: *'Things go better with Coke.'* *'Black people are addicted to illegal drugs and crime.'* Support all this with a national media owned by defense contractors and other corporate interests. That way, the nightly news has lots of money-making incentives to cover HUD-sponsored drug raids in black communities, rather than doing a story on CIA drug trafficking."

"That is so... *fucked*," Pam says.

Catherine nods in agreement. "The most efficient ethnic cleansing is self-financed or, better yet, profitable. Drugs and alcohol are excellent tools toward that end, especially when they're combined with easy access to guns. Sell large amounts of addictive substances to a group of people in an area you want to take over, and then use the cash flow to buy up their homes and commercial real estate for pennies on the dollar, without much competition, while you enjoy the full value of their cash flow. You can then afford the long holding period required to make the land profitable again after the cleansing period is over."

"There you have it, folks," Pam says as her Skype video feed briefly takes over the screen. "A lesson in Tapeworm Economics 101. Consider yourselves warned, because now—if I understand

you correctly, Catherine—similar financial entrapment models are being used to target America's middle-class. Which is probably one reason why the suicide rate for white middle-aged Americans has spiked by forty percent over the last ten years."

"That's right," Catherine says, back in split-screen mode. "When you look at what's happening with debt, something new has been going on in the last twenty years that we've never seen before. We've seen debt used as a control mechanism and we've seen financial entrapment of nations—and economic hits on nations using debt—for centuries. So that game is as old as the hills. But when you combine digital systems—you know... electronic financial transactions, computer and phone systems, the Internet, smart phones... with, *um*, artificial intelligence, relational databases, and now the cloud—what you're talking about doing is being able to run economic hits at the individual level, globally. That's why Snowden's revelations were so important, because if you look at them in combination with debt, we're talking about a much more invasive entrapment system. That system can now literally reach through sovereign nations and start controlling everything from municipalities to households directly."

"And, as you pointed out, in a system ruled by tapeworm economics, the parasites make money off other people's misery," Pam observes. "You lose your job and the next day the interest rates on your credit cards get jacked to almost thirty percent. Or you get sick and—because of the anti-trust exemption in the McCarren-Ferguson Act that lets big insurance companies share information and collude to divvy up markets—you wind up paying a ten thousand dollar deductible before your Obamacare plan will deign to cover the first dollar of medical expenses, even though you've been paying the sky-high premiums for years."

Catherine nods. "The reality is that in some scenarios total economic collapse looks like the most attractive option to these elite sociopaths—but what I'm more worried about is perpetual entrapment. When you create a tapeworm economy that allows insiders to make money from people's failures, municipality failures, country failures... and they can constantly harvest places

and pick up all the equity on the cheap by using this entrapment model... then it never has to collapse. I call it the slow burn economy. In theory, it can keep going forever. Or, I should say, the military and intelligence agencies can decide to keep it going forever, because it runs on violence, or the threat of violence, from a personal level on up to the level of being able to wage wars, both foreign and domestic, visible and *invisible*. Their willingness to kill to achieve their ends is not an illusion.”

“So who are these parasites—and how can we get rid of them?” Pam asks.

Catherine frowns and says, “That’s what we need to find out. They operate in the shadows, hiding from the light of public scrutiny like vampires avoiding the sun. Because of their deceptions, we’re dealing with legal, financial, and physical debasement across every aspect of our lives. What I see happening right now... I call it a financial coup d’état. They’re re-engineering governments. The reality is that they’re shifting the liabilities into the sovereign nations and they’re pulling the assets away into private, invisible hands. Y’know, they took all the retirement savings before we wanted that money back, essentially. That’s what’s happened in Europe and the United States—pensions and Social Security funds have been stolen and moved offshore.”

“It’s global robbery,” Pam extrapolates. “Real wealth has been hijacked from the broad class of working people and entrepreneurs and transferred into the web of tax havens controlled by the world’s richest one-percent.”

Catherine nods in agreement. “So, from a re-engineering standpoint, where is this going? When you get all the assets into private hands and governments get stuck with all the liabilities, then those governments no longer have financial sovereignty. So then the question becomes: *Who’s really running things? Who’s behind this and what do they want?*”

“My bet is it’s the Archons running the show,” says Pam. “Either that, or those little grey alien bastards.”

“It’s funny you should mention aliens,” Catherine says. “In 1998, I was approached by John Peterson, the head of the Arlington Institute, a well-known military think tank in Washington. John asked me to help him with a high-level strategic plan that Arlington was about to undertake for the Undersecretary of the Navy. At the time, I was still the target of an intense smear campaign that would have led any normal person to assume I would be in jail shortly, or worse. John told me the Navy understood that it was all politics—they didn’t care. I met with a group of high-level people in the military in the process—including the Undersecretary. According to John, the purpose of the plan was to help the Navy adjust their operations for a world in which it was commonly known that aliens exist and live among us. When John explained this purpose to me, I told him that I didn’t know that aliens existed and lived among us. John asked me if I would like to meet some aliens. For the only time in my life, I declined an opportunity to learn about something important.”

“I so totally would’ve gone to meet the aliens,” says Pam, speaking as a girl who’s always up for weird new adventures. “What stopped you?”

“Well, I didn’t know if it was a legitimate offer,” Catherine explains. “You have to recall my situation. It could have been an attempt to discredit me... y’know, *Catherine Austin Fitts says she’s been talking to aliens*. I was getting enough bad press already. I didn’t need any more.”

“So you haven’t met any aliens since?”

“No—but on July 4th, 2013, in honor of Independence Day, I published the minutes of the March 26th, 1999 Board of Directors meeting of the Arlington Institute, in which it was stated that the Institute had been approached to determine if it would be interested in publishing a study on the subject of life outside of Earth. That study examined the extraterrestrial contact issue as a ‘wild card’ future scenario event. After discussion, there was general agreement that publication of the study would be a good idea and would be consistent with the

work otherwise being done by the Institute with respect to wild cards.”

“This leads us right into a discussion about ‘the breakaway civilization’...” Pam says. “I’ve been hearing you use that term a lot lately. Can you explain what it means for our viewers who might not be up to speed on it yet?”

“Sure. The breakaway civilization is a term that originated with Richard Dolan, the respected UFO researcher.”

“*Respected UFO researcher?* That’s kind of an oxymoron, isn’t it?” Pam asks with ample justification.

“Well, *I* certainly respect him—as do a lot of other people,” says Catherine. “Richard Dolan is a very credible, serious intellectual who’s done the research to chronicle the undeniable reality of the UFO phenomenon and the Deep State’s efforts to cover it up. Working from archival sources, professional journals, and previously classified documents released through the Freedom of Information Act, Richard has aggregated his research into two groundbreaking volumes called *UFOs and the National Security State*, in which he demonstrates that the UFO phenomenon is global and the result of advanced technology.”

“So he’s not just some head-tripping hippie with a strong yen for woo-woo.”

“Certainly not. Richard Dolan explains his theory of the breakaway civilization like this: When you look at the history of apparent UFO crashes and recoveries—and there are a number of them that he makes good cases for—you have to assume that the national security apparatus wasn’t just sitting on their hands looking at this technology forever. Of course they were going to study it and try to replicate it. How could they not? So the basic idea, as Richard explains it, is that you have a secret group, a classified group of people, with access to radically advanced science—and *they decide not to share it with the rest of the world*. One scientific breakthrough just leads to another, and another... until the next thing you know, you have a separate group of humanity—a breakaway civilization—that’s way ahead of the rest of the world, in terms of technology and power.”

“So if we go all the way back to the Roswell Crash,” says Pam, “that gives them about 70 years to get things right in the reverse-engineering department, with a ton of black budget funding and the kind of secrecy that’s been associated with Area 51 and Lockheed’s Skunk Works. Maybe that’s why Barry Seal was flying in and out of Area 51—so they could finance their breakaway technology with drug trafficking profits to avoid Congressional oversight and keep the American people totally in the dark.”

“The drug trade is a huge part of it. But they’ve also been bleeding American taxpayers the whole time. In a very real sense, we paid for that technology. It should be ours. The American people should own it.”

“You know what Ben Rich—the director of Lockheed’s Skunk Works—had to say about that, don’t you?” Pam asks Catherine, looking down at her notes. “In 1993, Ben Rich gave a presentation at the UCLA School of Engineering, where he said: ‘We already have the means to travel among the stars. But these technologies are so locked up in black programs that it would take an act of God to ever get them out to benefit humanity.’ Toward the end of that same presentation, he also said: ‘There’s an error in the equations—and we’ve figured it out—and now we know how to travel to the stars, and it won’t take a lifetime to do it.’ He didn’t explain *what kind* of equations he was talking about, but your friend, Joseph Farrell, has suggested they could have been the field equations of electromagnetism or the tensor equations of relativity. Whatever he was referring to, Ben Rich’s statements certainly could be taken as veiled confirmation of a secret space program and a breakaway civilization.

“As a side note,” Pam continues, “I saw in the *Washington Post* the other day that Lockheed Martian—excuse me, I meant to say Lockheed *Martin*—has a female CEO. Her name is Marillyn Hewson and she’s the highest-paid female CEO in the S&P 500. She made over 33 million dollars last year. Keeping black project secrets seems to pay off pretty well.”

“Let me tell you something about Lockheed Martin...” Catherine says. “When I was Assistant Secretary, and then a lead financial adviser to HUD, at that time a lot of the information systems and payment systems were under the lead contractor—Lockheed Martin. They got about 150 million a year just to run the core systems. When I tried to get data from the system, I couldn't get it. I was the Assistant Secretary of Housing and I couldn't get the data from Lockheed. They could deny me the basic data I needed as a legal matter to run my operation and do my fiduciary responsibilities. The same thing happened when I was a financial adviser.

“When a lot of people look at the government, they see 21 covered agencies and a group of intelligence agencies, but I don't see that. I see five contractors with a giant database and every one of those agencies is a collection cup. That's why they wanted me to use PROMIS-based software instead of the privately developed software we created through Hamilton Securities.”

“What's PROMIS?” Pam asks. “Or is that a dumb question?”

“No. Not at all!” Catherine says. “PROMIS was relational database software created by a company called Inslaw; it was later stolen by the U.S. Department of Justice. PROMIS allowed the government to move into anyone else's legacy database systems—police, law firms, banks, and so on. Then, once it was installed and combined with artificial intelligence, it could create extraordinary control file systems and an insidious sort of insider trading system. Trapdoors were built into PROMIS that allowed them to get all the government departments to participate in the ‘fraud’ without knowing it. Because of PROMIS, you couldn't get a financial disclosure that wasn't completely disassociated from what you walk around in and see every day. At HUD, for instance, if you asked for a list of foreclosed properties in a certain congressional district, you might get a list that showed ten properties in a place, but when you physically went there, it would turn out to be a vacant lot.”

“So our federal government doesn’t have information sovereignty *or* financial sovereignty,” Pam sums up.

“No. It lacks financial sovereignty because it’s dependent on the banks that control its depository and slush funds and create the currency through the Federal Reserve. It lacks information sovereignty because its data, information, and payments systems are controlled and operated by private corporations, primarily defense contractors. If we could dig out the true ownership of both banks and defense contractors, my guess is that it would look identical. Finally, the members of the Administration have no way of guaranteeing their safety and the safety of their families if they defy orders of those who have the weaponry and power to enforce their will by any means necessary. Like I said, what we have is a planet where the currency system and the economy are run by violence. Did you happen to read Edwin Black’s book on IBM and the Holocaust?”

“I haven’t gotten around to that one yet,” Pam admits.

“It’s about how IBM worked with Hitler to generate and tabulate punch cards based on Germany’s national census data, which allowed the Nazis to conduct the Holocaust. And now IBM has the contract to run the U.S. Census Bureau survey—”

“—which is incredibly invasive,” Pam interrupts. “I couldn’t *believe* all the financial information they wanted from me when I had to fill that thing out.”

“Once they know how much you have, they know how much they can steal from you.”

“And if you *don’t* fill out their stupid survey, they can fine you five thousand dollars, because it’s required by law. It’s like the Third Reich never ended.”

“Well, you might be right about that...” Catherine says.

Pam glances down at her notes again. “Joseph Farrell makes a good case that the Nazis were the first breakaway civilization to go public. During the war, Nazi scientists and engineers were accomplishing things that boggled the mind. They were making

major breakthroughs in rocketry, ballistics, jet propulsion, lasers, plasma physics, computers, semiconductors, and related technologies. After 12 terrifying years, the Nazis had to go underground again at the end of World War II, but Farrell says they're still out there, in a sense. They just got folded into the Anglo-American breakaway civilization via Operation Paperclip."

"What's going on now is much scarier than what Snowden has revealed," says Catherine. "*Enforcement*—who enforces, and how they enforce—is the key to the current economic and investment model on planet Earth. The CEO of Lockheed Martin would be somewhere near the apex of that enforcement pyramid, so it's no wonder she's being paid in the millions. It all comes down to a question of who has the biggest weapons. If you look at the UFO phenomenon, whoever owns and operates *that stuff* is in control—or competing for control. Right? So the question is: *Well, who has it?* Y'know, is it Lockheed Martin and the whole military-industrial-intelligence complex?"

"Is it Nazis R Us, the Dominion of Melchizedek, or the International Fraternal Order of Crypto-Fascists?" Pam shoots back, semi-facetiously.

Catherine chuckles. "Or is it off-planet? Richard Dolan says he's spoken to some people he considers credible who've told him there's a secret program connected with the Moon."

"Who the hell's paying for *that*, I wonder?"

"There's no telling." Catherine shrugs. "When you follow the financial system back, it's impossible to get satisfying statistics on who owns all the debt. Of course, in a world where humans own all the debt, it's a very different world than if civilizations off-planet own half the debt—or all the debt—because the debt system is just a control system. It's not really a financial system. It's a control system."

"So student loans, credit cards, mortgages... all that?"

"Correct. Essentially, yes. So the question is: *Who owns it?* And how much gold is there—and where is it? Is it all on this planet, or not? So you get into these very difficult questions,

where you have no data and it's very hard to get information. All I can tell you is that the chief question from an investment standpoint is: *Who has the most powerful weaponry?* And I can't answer that question. But here's the thing: if you take everything I've ever learned about the economy on planet Earth, what I would tell you is that the Earth is a REIT. Do you know what a REIT is—a Real Estate Investment Trust?"

"Sure," says Pam.

"And it's paying a tithe. And I don't know where that tithe is going. I don't know if it's going into underground cities. I don't know if we're building colonies on the dark side of the Moon. All I can tell you is that there's this steady drain. It's being harvested. I don't know if you've seen the movie *Jupiter Ascending*. There's this great line where the protagonist is fighting with somebody on another planet and they say, 'Look, Earth is just a very small part of a much bigger corporation.' Now, the funny thing about that line is: *That's exactly how the economic model works.* It's like every year they want a bigger dividend. And we constantly have to produce that dividend. People start fighting and their core assets get stolen from them when they can't produce enough. *That's what it feels like.* Now, I'm not saying it's true, but if you're going to grapple with what our leadership is up to, then the question is: *Are they really the leaders, or are they just in the middle?"*

"Are they just a bunch of sell-outs whose chains are being yanked by the shadowy slumlords of a breakaway civilization—or is it something even worse, like *Archontic possession?*"

"That's the question. I don't have the answer. But I can tell you that if you look at the housing bubble, it took thousands of changes in laws and regulations at the FHA, at HUD, at the Department of the Treasury, at the Department of Justice, at Freddie, at Fannie—the nuts-and-bolts of engineering the housing bubble took a lot of work. So this was coming from the highest levels of the government. This was a bubble engineered intentionally by government."

"Right—like that confidential 'End-Game Memo' that Greg Palast reported on a few years ago," says Pam. "You know the

one I'm talking about... the 1997 memo from Tim Geithner that showed how the top U.S. Treasury officials, led by Larry Summers, secretly conspired with a cabal of rich bankers to force every nation across the planet to accept trade in toxic assets like financial derivatives—or financial weapons of mass destruction, as Warren Buffet calls them—by making changes to the World Trade Organization's Financial Services Agreement. They always go around saying the housing bubble was an accident. No one could have predicted it. But you're saying they knew what they were doing all along—that the whole thing was fraudulent—the world's biggest pump and dump?”

“I think a lot of people were on a ‘need to know’ basis and didn't see the big picture. They didn't understand the extent of the fraud. But at the highest levels, *Yes—this was all known and understood*. They were deliberately setting out to destroy the middle-class in the developed world.”

“But why?”

“Because that's where the money was. *Someone* wanted a much bigger dividend in 2008. Here's what happened, or what I believed happened: For many years we've had this hidden system of finance—the tapeworm economy. Then we went through a period where the hidden system of finance overwhelmed the overt financial system. That's what the bailouts and the financial crisis were about. They engineered the bailouts and then the Federal Reserve continued with quantitative easing. I believe the Fed had a shredding party because they were buying up a huge amount of fraudulent paper and essentially shredding it while it was on their balance sheet. So I think between the bailouts and the quantitative easing they both cleaned up a lot of the fraud and paid off a lot of people.

“Think of it this way: *It's like a leveraged buyout, except that instead of buying out a company, you're buying out the entire planet.*

“So you issue forty trillion dollars of fraudulent paper—that's the number I came up with—and you use that forty trillion to get control of the financial mechanism. Then, once you have control of the financial mechanism, you have the bailouts and you use

that to shred and cover up the paper. And you wait for the statute of limitations to be over and then you're out on the other side. The coup d'état is over. I'm greatly oversimplifying but, essentially, that's how it worked."

"Sheesh! *Forty trillion*? I remember reading that every single mortgage in America could've been paid off with about eight trillion dollars. So where did all that money go?"

"Money is like the Pillsbury Doughboy," Catherine explains; "when you squeeze down on one part, it pops up someplace else. In a situation like this, the money doesn't go to any one place. Some of it probably went into the emerging markets to balance the global economy. So you pull capital out of the mature economies and you reinvest it in the high-growth economies. I think these guys saw what was coming and they said, 'Look, we can spend this money on nursing homes, or we can take it out now—pull it out of retirement funds, pull it out of pensions—and create enough of a financial juggernaut that we can continue to run whatever we want to run on a private endowment basis.' There was basically enough money left over to produce perpetual dividends and interest sufficient to run a world government without taxpayers."

"So you notice that we go into a budget sequestration and they're talking about cutting the defense budget, but Lockheed Martin's stock keeps going up. *Why is that*? I think it's because the black budget projects run on secret money, as Joseph Farrell and Richard Dolan have pointed out in their books. So it's not just the money that's getting siphoned off from other agencies and the technical black budget. It's also the secret sources of funding—from the international drug trade and so on. So I think a huge amount of the bailout money went there."

"So you're saying we had our retirement savings ripped-off and the equity in our houses plundered so the breakaway civilization could pay for its secret space program and a one-world government?"

"I know how crazy it sounds when you put it that way, but the answer is *Yes*. Once you understand how black budgets and

black projects work... how information technology, relational databases, and financial entrapment models work... suddenly, it all starts making sense. But I do know that we have the power to choose freedom. Our freedom comes to us from divine authority. I went through a process where I said, 'Okay, I'm going to choose freedom and they're going to kill me.' I was sure I had no chance to live—but I made it."

"I'm so glad you did," Pam says.

"Miracles happen when you make that choice. So we have to make that choice." Catherine pauses to take a loving glance at Pam. "Now, tomorrow... I can say this to you because you're a very attractive woman... tomorrow, if every woman went up and said, 'Every man who is doing anything evil gets no sex'—all of this would stop."

Pam laughs and says, "Not if the breakaway civilization guys have already invented black project sexbots with disposable orifice linings."

"Kid all you want, but you know it's true."

"I'm not so sure we can change the behavior of impotent old gargoyles like Dick Cheney that way, but *yeah*—for the majority of men, I'd say it's true."

"Of course it's true. One of the most powerful books I've ever read was Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation*, where he says that if we bring transparency to who's doing true evil, they'll be shunned."

"That's what my boyfriend's last book was all about: creating an unhackable international website called Shitbirds.com that would be like an obligatory, inescapable Facebook cataloging the crimes of the psychopathic power elite."

"That sounds like a book I'd enjoy reading. What's your boyfriend's name?"

"Derek Swannson. His book is called *The Snowden Avalanche*."

"Didn't he also write those *Crash Gordon* books?"

“Yeah, that’s my guy. He’s not evil. I have sex with him, like, all the time.”

“Good for you! And I’m sure it’s good for him, too.”

“Oh, it’s *very good* for him—or at least that’s what he tells me.” Pam smirks. “But I get what you’re saying... we need to reward the good guys and shun the bad guys. That’s why capitalism ultimately doesn’t work without incorruptible judicial oversight and simple laws that protect people and the environment. The brutish imperative of the pure profit motive always ends up trumping morality. Too many bad guys rise to the top.”

Catherine says: “Someone needs to sit down at a dinner party with Goldman Sachs and tell them, ‘You’re the scumbags that are responsible. You should be worried that someone will shoot you. And if someone *does* shoot you, we’ll defend them in a court of law and claim it was self-defense.’”

“Well, I might not go *that* far...” Pam says, “but we should at least put the thieving assholes in prison and take away their ill-gotten gains when they break the law. No more of this lame slap-on-the-wrist shit with fines that don’t even cover a tiny fraction of what they stole in the first place. No bank should be too big to fail—and no banker should be too big to jail.”

“My thoughts exactly. We need to hold people in our lives accountable. So this is a matter of bringing transparency and taking action. If everybody in America pulled their money out of the banks that are doing the fraud, things would shift. It’s like having a parasite that feeds off your bad choices. If you start to eliminate those bad choices that are feeding the parasite and draining you, the parasite gets weaker and you get stronger. And that’s what we have to do.”

“All right,” says Pam. “I think that’s a great note to end this on. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with me tonight, Catherine.”

“Thank *you*, Pam...” Catherine says, “and good luck to you and your boyfriend.”

“Thanks. I have a feeling we’ll need it.”



You can say that again... I think as my missing girlfriend retakes the screen for a final, show-stopping close shot. *Where did our luck go, Pam?* I wonder. *Where did you go?*

“So there you have it, folks,” Pam says, wrapping up the video. “Catherine Austin Fitts—what a great lady! In an era when gender is becoming less of an issue, when women can rise to the highest levels within the same apex of power that used to be the exclusive domain of men, when Hillary Clinton is poised to become our next U.S. President and Marillyn Hewson is already Chairman and CEO of the world’s largest defense contractor... well, it’s good to be reminded that there are brave and intelligent women out there who are willing to take a principled stand against oligarchic evil and not just succumb to it in their quest to become female Masters of the Universe.

“At the start of this video, I said you didn’t need to believe in Archons or Loosh for my presentation here to make sense. You could think of those two terms as analogous to sociopathic global elitists and the health, wealth, and happiness they think it’s their right to steal from everyone else. But now I’d like you to consider how the Archontic agenda fits, hand-in-glove, with what Catherine told us about tapeworm economics and the breakaway civilization.

“Has a small group of parasitic insiders been using the world economy to further their own sociopathic agenda by making money from our financial miseries and misfortunes? Have we been unknowingly paying a tithe to a breakaway civilization? Is that same breakaway civilization now trying to turn the rest of us into a race of castrated zombies that only exist to serve corporate greed? How different is that, really, from the Gnostic concept of Archons as interdimensional prison wardens that harvest our human soul-energy—or *Loosh*?

“Here’s what I think: Every time we give in to fear or anger or depression, we’re feeding those mind-parasites, the Archons. So let’s just cut that out, okay? I know that sometimes it seems our whole society is geared toward producing those low-level emotions. Celebrity magazines promote envy, Victoria’s Secret window displays foster unrealistic body expectations and self-loathing, and you can’t click through the cable channels without seeing at least three glittery teen vampire movies, one alien apocalypse, two dozen car crashes, and the endless glorification of billionaire business titans who just need a little love and understanding while they screw over every single person they’ve ever known.

“But like Catherine said, when we start to eliminate our bad choices, the parasites grow weaker while we grow stronger. So the next time you feel yourself getting angry or upset about something, just take a step back. Become an observer of your own life and ask yourself: ‘Is this really coming from me? Or does someone—or some *thing*—want me feeling this way so it can feed off me?’

“I know that sounds strange—and it will *feel* strange, observing your own emotions like that—but it really helps. Believe me. You’ll be amazed at how quickly you can turn off negative, self-sabotaging thoughts and emotions when you realize you’ve been tricked into having them.

“So let’s take back our power. Let’s stop being oblivious hosts for parasites—human and otherwise. They’re out there. There’s no use denying that. And if Richard Dolan’s suspicions are correct, their breakaway civilization could be much further along than most of us can even imagine. But the numbers are still on our side. And good can still triumph over evil. We just have to make the evil more transparent—and consciously choose the good.”

As Pam’s fades to black, a final title card appears on the screen:

A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death—the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders we are not going to be judged.

—Czeslaw Milosz, *The Discreet Charm of Nihilism*

“Oh man, she ended it with a quote from my favorite poet, good ol’ Czeslaw...” I tell Crash. “How cool is that?”

“Very cool,” my brother says. “Pam did a great job of putting the pieces together. I’m even half-in-love with Catherine Austin Fitts now, after seeing that interview. I wonder if she’s single?”

“So all that stuff you were telling me about Maury Island—it’s starting to make sense now. Was that the beginning of the breakaway civilization in the U.S.?”

“It’s as good a marker as any,” Crash says with a shrug. “It was the start of the Deep State’s UFO cover-up, which Stanton Friedman has called a ‘cosmic Watergate.’ Fred Crisman is the key. There’s evidence linking Crisman and his JFK assassination co-conspirator, Clay Shaw, to Operation Paperclip. It’s shaky—as that sort of evidence usually is for Deep State operatives—but there are documents out there that identify Crisman as an ‘extended agent’ for the CIA, who specialized in ‘internal disruption activities.’ He was certainly disrupting local politics in Tacoma. And when he got a job with Boeing in Seattle, he wreaked havoc there while sending secret reports to the CIA about Boeing’s top executives.”

“So did Boeing make those UFOs that Crisman and Dahl saw over Maury Island?” I ask. It seems like a reasonable question, now that I’ve been briefed on breakaway civilizations.

“No. I don’t think Boeing made those particular UFOs,” says Crash, “but Boeing might’ve reverse-engineered something like them years later, maybe by making use of Thomas Townsend Brown’s breakthroughs in electrogravitics. I’m pretty sure now that what Harold Dahl and his crew saw over Maury Island was the real deal—meaning it was some sort of advanced aeronautical technology that hadn’t been engineered by humans. But that doesn’t necessarily mean those six UFOs came from outer space. They could have just as easily been assembled here on Earth.”

“Deros technology whizzing out from underground caverns, like Richard Shaver wrote about for *Amazing Stories*?”

“Who’s to say? But there’s no evidence to suggest we had access to that sort of anti-gravity or *field propulsion* technology back in 1947. Maybe we do now, but not then.”

“What makes you think Harold Dahl didn’t just make the whole thing up?”

“Because the Deep State came down way too heavy on him. We already know about the Man in Black. But Richard Dolan’s theory is that Fred Crisman, as the CIA’s local disruption activities expert, was sicced on Dahl to become his handler, to control Dahl’s interactions with the public every step of the way. What Harold Dahl saw was an actual, unfaked, unexplainable UFO event—and Crisman’s job was to make it seem like a hoax.”

“Fuuuuuccckk...” I breathe. “Now that you’ve pointed it out, it seems obvious.”

“Richard Dolan came up with that theory in the first volume of his *UFOs and the National Security State* series,” Crash tells me. “It’s always stuck with me because it seemed so right. Until his death in 1982, Harold Dahl maintained that the Maury Island Incident had been real, but whenever the authorities had questioned him about it he agreed to say it was a hoax—for their benefit—because he didn’t want any trouble from them.”

“So they were going around secretly chasing UFOs, hoping to get a crack at alien technology—”

“—*They* meaning the Deep State or breakaway civilization.”

“—while at the same time, they were engaged in perception management... *psyops*... or whatever those Nazi fucks used to call it... *worldview warfare*... to make the general population think UFOs are a joke.”

“That about sums it up.”

“And now they’ve got Pam because they didn’t want her posting this video.”

“Well, that’s one possible explanation.”

“If someone got in touch with me and said they’d let go of Pam in exchange for this video, I’d do it. I’d make the trade,” I say. “But since no one’s asking, should we post it on Pam’s UTube channel?”

“Hell yes,” says Crash.



SEATTLE

**Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us.
Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of
irrelevance.**

—Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

THE SPACE NEEDLE INOCULATION

In a weird bit of synchronicity, when Crash phones up his former Seattle landlord, Bob Sasso, to ask about a good place for me to stay while I search for my missing girlfriend, Bob says he's doing a gut renovation of the kitchen in Crash's old Queen Anne apartment and I'm welcome to hang out there for free, if I don't mind eating all my meals in restaurants. I say that sounds like a great deal to me—so that's where I'm heading.

The flight from La Guardia to Sea-Tac takes about five hours. I pass the time by recalling my previous trips to see my brother in his old haunts at the Vanderbilt mansion (converted, post-Vanderbilts, into six spacious apartments that eventually went co-op). I remember it as a beautiful but spooky place: huge mahogany framed bay windows overlooking downtown Seattle, Elliot Bay, and the Space Needle; double-height ceilings supported by massive exposed mahogany beams; a limestone fireplace big enough to roast a suckling pig; and most memorable of all, there was a chunky antique grand piano that would sometimes play an eerie sort of Polynesian polyphonic music all by itself, late at night, in the echoing, loft-like living room.

I hope the exorcist's old banishing rituals have held up.

Crash had moved to Seattle and signed a lease with Bob Sasso in 1993, after breaking things off with Justine in Cambria.

Grunge music was all the rage back then. I was in my teens and Nirvana was my favorite band. In early 1994, after some major wheedling and cajoling, I finally convinced our mother to let me visit Crash over Easter vacation. I was old enough to fly by myself then (barely) and, if I remember correctly, the round-trip ticket was cheap—less than two hundred bucks. I paid for it out of my savings from working the local dump truck route with my friend, Stan the Garbage man.

At the time, the cult of Quentin Tarantino was in the early stages of taking off, while grunge was reaching its apogee, so those two cultural touchstones will always be conflated in my mind. I was just a skinny, buck-toothed nobody with blonde bangs, but everywhere I went during that first, all-too-brief Seattle sojourn, my inherently overdramatizing teen mind always saw Mt. Rainier—that legendary UFO hot spot—looming white and majestic somewhere in the background as my theatrical, slo-mo *Reservoir Dogs* style of striding around was accompanied by the greatest hits of grunge on my mental soundtrack.

Yeah, here come the rooster....

It was fun hanging out with my long-lost brother, who'd gone missing from my childhood for several years due to the amnesia he'd suffered after his 1983 car crash in Big Sur. It felt good to have him back again. He took me around to his favorite restaurants (Wild Ginger, The Pink Door, Bizzarro) and snuck me into the local clubs (The Crocodile Cafe, The O.K. Hotel, Tractor Tavern, RKCNDY, Moe's...). Crash's Seattle lifestyle seemed incredibly cool in comparison to the harrowing slog that was my life under our mother's thumb in Kingsburg. I felt my own coolness quotient shooting way up just by associating with him. It also helped that Crash was dating a semi-famous radio DJ named Gülru Gitxaala who always had front-row tickets to the best shows in town.

I feel stupid and contagious / Here we are now, entertain us....

Unlike most radio hosts, Gülru was a looker—a stunning genetic combo of kohl-eyed Iranian desert princess and Tsimshian Indian—with a long, elegant nose, raven black hair, and perky

tits. She was also, winningly, whip-smart and sarcastic as hell. She liked to wear black leather microminis, super-tight jersey tops, and thigh-high black boots with stacked heels. Whenever it was cold out, her nipples would harden under the jersey knit like hollow-point bullet tips and she'd put on a scruffy, silver-zippered motorcycle jacket. Gülru was a few years younger than Crash—which put her in her mid-twenties—an older woman, from my perspective, but not *too much* older. I remember how desperately I wanted to see her naked. At fourteen, I was still a virgin. My libido, however, was pumped up way beyond the size of that mosquito referenced in Kurt Cobain's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" lyrics. Perving on my brother's girlfriend felt like a psychic betrayal, but I couldn't help myself.

I'm a creep, yeah, I'm a jerk / Come on / Touch me, I'm sick....

I'd been hoping Crash would help me get laid while I was visiting, but he said he didn't know any girls my age. I tried explaining to him that age didn't matter—a sixty-three-year-old toothless crack whore would suffice—but again, Crash said he hadn't done much socializing with the Patagonia-clad toothless crack whores of the Pacific Northwest. His reticence kind of ticked me off. *What good is having an older brother if he won't introduce you to the indiscriminate sluts of his acquaintance?* Even though I looked like a younger, gawtier version of Crash, Gülru was showing zero interest in jumping my adolescent bones (although she was sweet to me, in her sarcastic way), so it seemed my wick would stay undipped for at least a while longer. That didn't stop me from whacking off to the point of exhaustion every night while Crash and Gülru were going at it, rather loudly, in the bedroom down the hall. From the sound of it, Gülru was some kind of porno-contortionist. My duffel bag ended up being the repository for a lot of crusty tube socks on that trip.

Took it all / Back in a cold dark corner of an empty house / On a cold dark April night....

After Crash showed me around town over the three-day Easter weekend, he had to go back to work. He was the director

of digital art at a place called Studio 3, less than a mile away on Aurora Avenue. Since I didn't have to leave until the following Sunday night, I just hung out in Crash's empty apartment during the weekdays—watching the rain, reading books, and listening to the radio. Gülru hosted a midday FM radio show, so I listened to her sexy, honey-smooth voice for hours on end. Sometimes it seemed like she was talking just to me in-between the songs she played by Alice in Chains, Nirvana, Mudhoney, Silkworm, Soundgarden, Mother Love Bone, more Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Pigeonhed, and Mark Lanegan. She also played a lot of Heart—which seemed incongruous—but then one evening while we were having dinner I found out that Ann and Nancy Wilson were friends with Gülru. They'd used their cash from Heart's mega-success to finance Bad Animals Studio, where a lot of the famous grunge albums had been produced—so it kind of made sense that Gülru would know them. She even offered to introduce me to the Wilson sisters. I had a brief fantasy about making out with Nancy—the foxy blonde guitar-playing sister—but Gülru disabused me of that notion by telling me that Nancy was married to the famous writer-director, Cameron Crowe, who was cooler than me by, like, eons. When Cameron was my age, he was already writing for *Rolling Stone*.

I'm looking California and feeling Minnesota....

Outshined again, I was moping around the next day in Crash's apartment when I heard Gülru come on the radio to announce that a body had been found at Kurt Cobain's Seattle home out near Lake Washington. I thought to myself: *Poor Kurt! He never stops getting hassled. He's married to that crazy bitch Courtney. She blabbed to Vanity Fair about shooting heroin while she was pregnant, so their baby got taken away from them. Ever since, Kurt's had all those stomach problems. He almost overdosed on painkillers in Rome during Nirvana's European concert tour. And now some stupid groupie has OD'd in his back yard.* I was a little slow on the uptake. Gülru soon set me straight, announcing in a tearful voice that while no official reports had yet confirmed that the body belonged to Kurt Cobain, that's what people on the scene were saying. *Fuck! There goes the suicidally depressed spokesman for my*

generation... I thought. Later that same day, it became clear that Kurt had joined the 27 Club, adding his name to the roster of famous musicians who'd died in their 27th year: Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones, D. Boon, Chris Bell, Alan "Blind Owl" Wilson, Robert Johnson... the list goes on and on.

Cry for me and rub it in / Cry for the savior and the prophet's son....

Later that same day, back in bed after a melancholy grunge-anecdote-and-drink-saturated dinner at The Pink Door with Crash and Gülru, I heard the piano in Crash's haunted apartment playing itself for the first time, as if to mark the occasion. It sounded like a sonata for troubled toucans. When I left my bedroom and caught the tail end of the performance from the end of the hallway, watching the ivories being tickled by an invisible presence, I freaked the fuck out. I must have yelped, because Crash ambled down the hall in his flannel pajamas and told me not to worry about it—he'd experienced the phenomenon before and he believed the ghost was harmless, maybe even beneficent.

I don't have to think, I only have to do it / The results are always perfect, but that's old news....

Of course I had to go join all the despondent grunge fans gathering for a memorial to Kurt Cobain in the shadow of the Space Needle at the Seattle Center two days later. It was just a short walk down the hill from Crash's apartment. I'd already been to the Seattle Center a few times to catch the monorail downtown (it was Crash's preferred mode of transportation on nights out when he knew he'd be drinking), so I knew how to get there by myself. Crash and Gülru wisely chose not to join me. It was a shitshow: kids climbing around all over the fountain, some stupid shirtless dudes crowd-surfing, everyone competing to see who could look the most flamboyantly depressed. The tape recording of Courtney Love's croaky voice reading Kurt's suicide note over the P.A. system was the absolute low point. Toward the end, she told the crowd to call Kurt an asshole for killing himself and that's what they did, chanting *Asshole! Asshole!* at the ghost of the guy who'd given them so much—the grunge saint

from Aberdeen who'd been so steeped in pain that he didn't feel like he could keep coping with this hostile, heartbreaking world.

She lies and says she's in love with him / Can't find a better man....

Fucking idiots. I get it—Courtney thought Kurt was a jerk for taking his own life—but still... why hadn't anyone been looking out for him? Why hadn't anyone told him it was okay to let the whole rock star thing go if it was making him miserable? When I thought about it, Kurt Cobain's death seemed as sad and senseless as the death of Vincent van Gogh—another artist suicided by society at the height of his powers. Much later, I'd find out that some researchers believed van Gogh had been shot by some asshole kid in Auvers-sur-Oise fooling around with a loaded pistol, while others believed Courtney had hired some thug motherfuckers to take out her husband because he'd been talking to his attorney about getting a divorce. *Who knows?** All I knew for sure was that I'd never bought into that Sunday school smugness about suicides being sent straight to hell. A compassionate God wouldn't add to the suffering of someone who'd already suffered so much. But maybe there's a temporary, educational sort of hell awaiting those who drove others to suicide—a Bardo of perfect understanding, perhaps, where you're shown how your own thoughts and deeds brought misery to those you were supposed to care for and encourage. The afterlife might not be so pleasant for the Courtney Loves of this world.

A gun / A knife / Different ways to take a life....

I almost missed my flight back to Kingsburg. My first trip to Seattle had ended on a bum note. The follow-up trips didn't go much better. The next time I saw Crash, a few years later in 1996 or '97, we had a plan to go see the Sex Pistols play live at

* There were also rumors floating around that Courtney had been rekindling her love affair with Billy Corgan—the frontman for The Smashing Pumpkins. Kurt, devastated, had supposedly found a sympathetic listener in Kristen Pfaff—the bassist in Courtney's band, Hole—who became a member of the 27 Club just two months after Kurt. She died of a heroin overdose on the day before she was scheduled to leave Seattle to rejoin her original band, Janitor Joe, in Minneapolis, after quitting Hole. Did Kristen Pfaff know something about Kurt's death? Did someone murder her because she would have talked? Again, *who the hell knows?*

Bumbershoot. When I got there, I found Crash recovering from a stab wound in his left hand. Gülru had done it to him. Crash had decided to break up with her after she'd admitted to having an affair with Layne Staley, the lead singer for Alice in Chains. Gülru claimed she'd instituted a life-affirming program of mercy fucking to save the legendary frontman from heroin addiction after his fiancée died. She didn't want to see Layne suffer the same fate as Kurt Cobain. It had nothing to do with the deep bond she shared with Crash, she said. Crash disagreed. When he told her they were through, Gülru pulled a switchblade on him. Apparently, Layne had been instructing her in the fine art of speedballing. Gülru later explained that all she'd wanted to do was cut off my brother's blonde ponytail, to have as a Delilah-esque keepsake, but Crash had misinterpreted the gesture and raised his hand in self-defense. She might have been "feeling a little stabby" that day, she admitted, but she hadn't really intended to harm him. Crash didn't press charges, but he didn't just kiss and make up with Gülru after that, either. They haven't spoken since.

My girl, my girl, where will you go / I'm going where the cold wind blows....

There's something about Seattle that seems to bring out the worst in people: drug addiction, seasonal affective disorder, a craven, serf-like willingness to work for life-devouring corporations like Microsoft, Boeing, and Glamazon. Maybe it's all the rain. The last year he lived there, Crash swears it rained every day for nine months straight. The sun didn't make a full appearance until mid-July. After that, he just said *fuck it* and moved to New York.

As the plane begins its descent toward Sea-Tac, I start to wonder if Gülru is still in town. I don't know if she'll remember me, but she might be a good person to talk to before I go storming into Bad Animals Studio to confront Conye. After all this time, I doubt Crash will care if I look her up. He might even be interested to find out what happened to her. Gülru was his last serious girlfriend, so far as I know. It's been 21 years since Kurt Cobain died, which makes it 18 or 19 years since my brother has been in a relationship.

That's a long time to go without.



By the time I get through baggage claim and rent a graphite gray Nissan Pathfinder from Hertz, it's getting dark. I drive into Seattle through a fine, fog-like drizzle. The view through the windshield is all office towers, overpasses, and smeary golden lights. I'm not feeling the Emerald City's magic this trip—maybe because it's my first time driving there. The traffic sucks. It's even worse than traffic in New Jersey. After several wrong turns—and a side trip downtown to check out the awesome Seattle Central Library building designed by Rem Koolhaas—the clunky add-on Hertz GPS navigation system finally does its job and gets me to Crash's old address up on Queen Anne Hill. I park out in front on a street named West Olympic Place.

The former Vanderbilt mansion is just as I remember it: four double-height floors with exterior walls of dark chocolate brown bricks (oversized, scorched-looking); a deep portico out in front smothered in crimson climbing ivy (spidery, half-dead, seemingly sucking blood from the brickwork); and big bay windows on all four sides featuring the original, over-a-century-old rolled glass (wavy, bubble-specked, tinted a ghostly shade of green). The mansion's spooky grandeur is undiminished. If anything, the dim light from the streetlamps makes it look even spookier—kind of like that eerie Victorian Gothic country house in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, minus the enlivening influence of sweet transvestites from Transsexual, Transylvania.

Crash told me Bob Sasso would leave a set of keys for me under the doormat. Sure enough, when I approach the varnished mahogany double-doors under the portico and lift the doormat's bristly right corner, that's what I find there: two newly-cut silver keys on a twist tie ring. I let myself in.

The mansion's parlor floor receiving area looks like something you might find in the lobby of an old European hotel: a dark expanse of polished tiger-oak flooring set in a herringbone

pattern, elegant mahogany paneled walls, and an umbrella stand made from an elephant's leg, severed at the kneecap. (I'm hoping it's just a reproduction and not the real thing.) A gaudy Chihuly chandelier dangles like some flash-frozen Portuguese man o' war from the coffered wood ceiling about ten or twelve feet above a gold brocade sofa. The tall, brass-knobbed door to Crash's old apartment is on the right.

Honey, I'm home! I think to myself, recalling the axe-wielding psycho played by Jack Nicholson in Stanley Kubrick's movie adaptation of *The Shining*.

The smell of machine oil and galvanized pipe shavings greets me as I enter the apartment. The kitchen, immediately to my right, is stripped down to the bare studs. A pipe-threading machine has been set up on steel sawhorse legs in the middle of the plywood-covered floor. *A house this old, and this grand, should have copper plumbing*, I mentally scold Bob Sasso—although it's really none of my business. Galvanized plumbing is cheaper and easier to install. Maybe Bob feels like he has to cut some corners these days—although I would think that Seattle real estate has done nothing but appreciate in the years since Crash lived here.

The rest of the apartment hasn't changed. It's just as Crash left it—maybe even close to how the Vanderbilts left it before him. (I idly wonder if Anderson Cooper ever spent time here visiting family as a boy with his mom, Gloria Vanderbilt, before he became a CNN news anchor.) There's the haunted grand piano, looking like a piece of brutalist sculpture. Beyond it, the huge bay windows—as big as a multiplex movie screen—overlooking the lit-up Space Needle, the glittery lights of downtown Seattle, and a picturesque ferry chugging across Elliot Bay toward Bainbridge Island.

A one-year lease on an apartment like this in Manhattan would go for somewhere in the six-figure range. Even here in Seattle, I'm sure Bob Sasso has been raking in well over \$5,000 a month for it. It's incredibly generous of him to allow me to stay here for free—even with the out-of-commission kitchen.

I go down the hallway to stash my suitcase in the same bedroom where I stayed when I was visiting Crash. But then I think better of it and head down the hallway to the gigantic master bedroom where Crash used to sleep. It has another set of bay windows, identical to the windows in the living room. It also, conveniently, has a large flat screen TV mounted on the wall opposite the king-sized bed, which makes me feel like I've landed in a five-star hotel room. Someone has even made up the bed with fresh linen and a goose down comforter.

I owe Bob Sasso big time.

I find myself wishing Pam could be with me. All this luxury and twilight solitude is making me feel horny. So I get right down to the business of finding her—doing what I can. My first move is to look up Gülru Gitxaala on LinkedIn, using my iPhone. Not surprisingly, there's only one person on LinkedIn with that crazy name. It turns out that Gülru is now working for Glamazon, of all places. In her abbreviated public bio, she claims to be the voice behind Galatea, the sexy A.I. babe inside Glamazon's Gecko—the amazingly popular voice-controlled computer module that can take charge of almost every fucking smart device in your home these days.

I had no idea Gülru was such a cyber-celebrity.

There isn't any contact information available to the public on her LinkedIn page, so I send a request asking her to add me to her professional network. I personalize it a bit by writing:

Hey Gülru,

Not sure you'll remember me: I'm Gordon Swannson's younger brother. We met back in the '90s at my brother's apartment in Seattle—which is where I'm staying now, thanks to his old landlord. I'm hoping I can meet up with you to say hello and pick your brain about Bad Animals Studio. I have to go there to have what could end up being a very ugly conversation with Conye Best (long story). If there's anything you can do to help me prepare for that encounter, I'd be grateful.

All best, Derek

LinkedIn's 500-character limit is kind of a drag when you're a novelist like me, but I'm hoping Gülru will get the gist of my conundrum and write back.

Next, I skip from LinkedIn over to Pam's UTube channel, so I can strengthen our psychic connection and make sure her new Archons and Loosh video is still up. Crash helped me post it late last night. We had no way of knowing how UTube's censors would react to it.

Un-fucking-believable! The new video has already logged over half-a-million viewers in less than a day. It's going viral.

I guess your fan base seriously ramps up when you get your face on the cover of *VanityWeek*. Fake-fucking Conye Best appears to be a good career move.

I *hope* it's just faked fucking—a false story designed to sell magazines. I still have no way of knowing.

I do an Oogle search for "Pam of Siam" just to see what's out there. She's in the news everywhere. Gossip sites are going wild with the story about Conye leaving Limn for Pam, but the individual write-ups all seem to be variations on *VanityWeek*'s original story. I'm not seeing anything new. No recent photographs of Conye and Pam hanging out in Seattle, for instance. So the jury's still out. Maybe Pam has been faithful to me the entire time. It's just hard to believe, with all the TMZs and Perez Hiltons out there in the world proclaiming otherwise.

I wonder if there's any booze stashed away in this apartment. I feel like getting drunk. I'm even beginning to understand the appeal of heroin. My neocortex could use an OFF switch right about now.

Lacking mind-altering chemicals, I do the next best thing: I turn on the television.

The E! Network is definitely out. Ditto for Fox News (as a matter of spiritual integrity). But after clicking through the cable channels for a while, I land on a Nature documentary about Japanese snow monkeys narrated by Liam Neeson. I find it very soothing—almost soporific—listening to Liam recite lines in his

gruff Northern Irish lilt like: *“One quiet moment can have great significance when a young monkey bonds with a leader of the troop. In this clan, nothing goes unnoticed. It’s all part of the drama unfolding deep in the Japanese Alps....”*

So I spend the next hour watching a canny young macaque riding around on the back of the snow monkey equivalent of Conye Best.

Despite Liam Neeson’s calming influence, my thoughts still keep swerving toward obsession and depression. I imagine it’s how Kurt Cobain must have felt when he thought Courtney was screwing Billy Corgan behind his back. What was it that Pam said toward the end of her video? Something like:

“Become an observer of your own life and ask yourself: ‘Is this really coming from me? Or does someone—or something—want me feeling this way so it can feed off me?’... You’ll be amazed at how quickly you can turn off negative, self-sabotaging thoughts and emotions when you realize you’ve been tricked into having them.”

Have I been tricked? That’s the question. No one wants to admit he’s been a patsy for unseen entities that thrive on his abjection. But what if that’s what the whole Kurt Cobain thing was all about?

What if Kurt had been serving the Archontic / Illuminati agenda by channeling dark forces? First, by serving as a conduit for the despairing, life-negating memes that found expression in his lyrics and music. Later, by siphoning off enormous quantities of Loosh from his audience during Nirvana concerts to feed his interdimensional handlers. And finally, by volunteering to become a human sacrifice to the 27 Club, another timeless example of the *puer aeternus* self-slaughtered in his prime—with copycat suicides sure to follow.

I look out the bay windows at the glowing Space Needle, wondering if it secretly functions as a sort of wireless antenna tower for conducting Loosh. When I was in the crowd gathered at the Seattle Center for Kurt’s memorial, was our collective psychovoltage being harvested—attracted like lightning to the Space Needle’s curving steel girders and then shot upward into

space toward some interdimensional energy vortex that feeds the Archons on the Other Side? Did the ancient ziggurats and Aztec temples function in the same way? Does the Empire State Building—or Disneyland’s Matterhorn and Space Mountain—serve the same insidious purposes today?

Okay, so maybe my thoughts are getting away from me—soaring into the realm of the archetypes, or even pure fantasy—but at least I don’t feel depressed anymore. If I can inoculate myself against depression by thinking of the Space Needle as a megaphallic Loosh superconductor, I’ll do it and be grateful. *Whatever works.*

I click off the TV and get my Kindler out of my carry-on bag. Then I lie back on the bed and start reading an e-book called *The Rose of the World* by Daniel Andreev, recommended to me by one of my email friends, the Brooklyn mystic and Thoreau scholar, Dr. Kevin Dann.

Dr. Dann told me that Andreev wrote most of *The Rose of the World* while he was doing time in one of Stalin’s gulags. It became a bestseller in Russia when it was finally published in 1991. The book promulgates a sort of Many Worlds Theory of the Universe: Andreev saw our world as a middle plane in a war between the Worlds of Enlightenment above and the Worlds of Retribution opposing them from below. Not all that different, really, from Christianity’s three-pronged structure of earth, heaven, and hell (or even Scandinavian mythology’s Midgard, Niffleheim, and Asgard), but what I find myself liking about Andreev’s spiritual cosmogony is that he believed there are people called Heralds—*artists*, in the broadest sense of that word—who can channel the Powers of Light to link our world with the Worlds of Enlightenment.

Of course, it could go the other way, too: a naïve or compromised Herald might end up channeling demonic Forces of Darkness that link to the Worlds of Retribution.

Andreev emphasized the awesome responsibility given to Heralds: they had the power to bring life to creations that otherwise couldn’t manifest in our world. It was his contention

that “*many works of art created by poets, musicians, architects, and painters are rooted in worlds parallel to ours.*” (I’m quoting from the Forward to *The Rose of the World* written by Alla Andreevr.) “*Having acquired form on Earth, these works in turn come to life in one of the parallel worlds and are able to influence us from there.*”

How cool is that? Or how scary... depending on the source.

So it turns out I’m far from the first person to think it might be possible for artists like Kurt Cobain and Conye Best to channel dark forces and connect us, through their creations, to other worlds. In some circles (I’m thinking here of the subscribers to websites like IlluminatiWatcher.com and The Vigilant Citizen), that idea is common currency. I hope my own books—and Pam’s videos—originate from some higher plane in the Worlds of Enlightenment, but you never really know, do you? Wasn’t it Søren Kierkegaard who said that when we’re feeling our most saintly, we could be working for the devil?

I’m a student of onomastics—the study of the history and origin of proper names. When combined with my particular brand of semiotics—speculations about the occult or symbolic significance of certain words—I often end up with some very freaky results. For example, check out the names Kurt Cobain and Conye Best (*Curt Co-Bane = a briefrude mutual poison causing death or distress; Con-Ye Best = to deceive you in the most excellent way possible*). Weird, huh? It’s like the universe knows something that we don’t.

Which starts me thinking about how Carl Jung psychoanalyzed God in his book, *Answer To Job*. What a mindfuck *that* was... Jung basically ripped God a new asshole.

I open *Answer To Job* on my Kindle and started re-reading the section I’m thinking of. In it, Jung criticizes “*the unvarnished spectacle of divine savagery and ruthlessness*” that Yahweh displayed during his wager with Satan to test Job’s faith in his Creator. In Jung’s own words, Yahweh was “*the picture of a God who knew no moderation in his emotions and suffered precisely from this lack of moderation. He himself admitted that he was eaten up with rage and jealousy and that this knowledge was painful to him. Insight existed*

along with obtuseness, loving-kindness along with cruelty, creative power along with destructiveness.” In Jung’s considered opinion, shaped by a lifetime of clinical practice, “*A condition of this sort can only be described as amoral.*”

It takes some serious balls to stand up to a rancorous, despotic God like that. It’s like picking a fight with Superman—even if you can fart kryptonite, you know you’re still going to lose. When assaulted by that unaccountable source of infinite power and implacable wrath, any man is reduced to “*a half-crushed human worm, groveling in the dust.*” But the great thing about Job, according to Jung, was that he knew God’s omnipotence meant that “The Devil made me do it!” wasn’t a valid argument. So it was Yahweh, not Satan, who was ultimately responsible for screwing him over. It was Yahweh who sent the whirlwind that killed Job’s sons and daughters, Yahweh who God-blasted Job’s flock of sheep into burnt muttonchops and arranged to have his 3,000 camels stolen. And then—when even *all that* wasn’t enough to persuade Job to tell the good Lord to go fuck himself—it was Yahweh who afflicted Job with a scorching, king-hell case of herpes.

Throughout all that shit and disaster, however, Job still—perhaps naïvely—expected to find divine justice. He knew Yahweh was deeply conflicted within himself, like some cosmic vampire who suspects, deep down, that it’s wrong to keep drinking human blood. What Job ended up doing, by defending his human ways to Yahweh’s face, was the ultimate in speaking truth to power: Job insisted that he deserved help from God against God.

Of course, Job knew the deck was stacked against him—there would always be some way for God to write him off as a sinner. “I know, thou wilt not hold me innocent,” Job said to Yahweh. “I shall be condemned.” How could he *not* be a sinner when he was made weak (but commanded to be strong) and set loose as an unschooled innocent in a world ruled by Satan?

As Jung describes it: “*Yahweh abandons his faithful servant to the evil spirit and lets him fall without compunction or pity into the*

abyss of physical and moral suffering. From the human point of view, Yahweh's behavior is so revolting that one has to ask oneself whether there is some deeper motive hidden behind it."

So why is God such an asshole? Why does he allow the wicked to prosper while causing the innocent to suffer? Jung asks: *"Could a suspicion have grown up in God that man possesses an infinitely small yet more concentrated light than he, Yahweh, possesses? A jealousy of that kind might perhaps explain his behavior."*

What Jung fails to mention is that the Gnostics, long before him, had written of an infinitely small yet concentrated light in every man, woman, and child. They called it the Divine Spark—a spark of light from the True God, who exists in a world of eternal light beyond the dark abyss of human existence (as opposed to that bloodthirsty, tyrannical half-god we're stuck with here, the Demiurge—known to the Gnostics as Yaldabaoth, a.k.a. Yahweh). In the literature of Gnosticism, the Demiurge is said to have all the Divine Spark of a dog turd.

Does that make the Demiurge jealous? *Hell yes it does....*

Jung was familiar with the Gnostic belief that when we acquire *gnosis* we acquire knowledge of our Divine Spark—and with it, the realization that part of the True God resides within us, making us all part of the True God. Upon gaining that knowledge of our true nature, we realize that our soul's primary purpose is to undertake the journey back to our divine origins, far beyond this plane of material existence. But Yaldabaoth and his Archons—those fuckers—consider it their Spark-hating duty to keep us trapped here on Earth, feeding off us, by enthralling us with the pleasures (and pains) of the flesh and the pursuit of worldly wealth and power.

I'm starting to think Jung might have had it wrong. He wrote that *"the divine darkness which is unveiled in the Book of Job"* resulted from Yahweh being *"everything in its totality; therefore, among other things, he is total justice, and also its total opposite."* But come on... what good is a God that can't distinguish between right and wrong? That's no better than having a Republican majority in Congress. If a God is so preoccupied, or simply

unconscious, that he refuses to differentiate between good and evil—or is so lacking in compassion for mankind that he can't be bothered to care, one way or the other—then he's no True God at all. He's the Devil... or a Demiurge.

The Gnostics had it right all along.

I must have fallen asleep at that point, because the next thing I know, I'm waking up on the bed, still in my clothes. An eerie piano tune is playing in the next room—that crazy sonata for troubled toucans I heard on the day Kurt Cobain died.

Oh shit! I think to myself. *The ghost is back.*

My first instinct is to crawl under the bedcovers and hide there, shivering, like a little boy. But then I man up and go down the hallway. Crash told me the ghost was harmless, after all.

When I get within viewing distance, I'm startled to see a vaporous female form seated at the keyboard: long glossy black hair, a filmy backless blue gown, a shapely ass.... *Can a ghost give you a hard-on? This one might.*

Maybe she's a succubus, I think, proceeding with caution.

When I get close enough to see the ghost in profile, I realize with a shudder that *it's Pam's mom!* She looks just like she did in her porno prime during the San Fernando Valley years, before she got sick.

"Paithoon?" I ask her.

She turns toward me. I can see through her face—it's like looking through mist in a forest glen—but that face is still lovely. Gorgeous. Very much like Pam's. The ghost of Paithoon blinks her jade green eyes at me and says: "Time doesn't exist for me on the Other Side, but I can't stay here for long. Pam is in Room 502. Go to her before it's too late."

She smiles then and dissolves into nothingness.

There's nothing left to see, but before I turn away, I swear I hear Paithoon whisper between my ears: *I'm so glad you love one another, just as I've loved both of you.*

My mind is fucking blown. *Was that a hallucination, or what?*

By Room 502, I can only assume Paithoon was referring to the room that Kenneth Arnold stayed in at the Winthrop in Tacoma all those years ago. I pull my iPhone out of the left pocket of my jeans and do a quick Oogle search for “Winthrop Hotel Tacoma.” The top search result is:

Tacoma’s Winthrop hotel building has a new owner

The News Tribune > [article26286724](#)

It turns out the former hotel has been an affordable-housing complex for a while now. A company named Redwood Housing Partners just bought it for \$8.5 million from the trustee overseeing the bankruptcies of the previous owners. The property, built in 1925, appears to be very rundown and in need of several million dollars’ worth of repairs to bring it back up to code. It’s currently home to 194 low-income apartments.

One of those apartments must be Room 502.

I decide to drive to Tacoma in the morning. There’s no point in going out there this late at night to knock on doors. The residents would probably just call the cops.

As if my internal thoughts are manifesting in reality, I hear a knock on the door behind me.

First the ghost of Pam’s mom and now... *what’s next?* I go to the front door and look through the brass peephole.

Standing on the other side, looking grim, is a Woman in Black: black boots, black gloves, tight-fitting black quilted jumpsuit, a severe black haircut in the style of Bettie Page, and black wraparound sunglasses that appear to be glued to her face. Visually, she falls somewhere in the range between Trinity—from *The Matrix*—and Catwoman.

I might have felt intimidated if I hadn’t recognized her right away:

It’s Gülru.

GULLED BY GÜLRU

“Derek! You’re all grown up!”

“Gülru...” I say, hugging her in the doorway, “you’re looking even hotter than I remember.”

“Thanks,” she says, without blushing. This is a woman who takes compliments for granted. When she kisses my cheek, her lips linger there a beat longer than usual for a friendly greeting between old acquaintances. “How’s your brother?” she asks me.

“He’s great,” I say, not wanting to get into the details. “He’s living in New York now. I just came from there.”

When we get into the living room, Gülru goes over and sits down on the piano bench, right where Paithoon’s ghost was sitting, but facing in the opposite direction. I turn around a wingback chair and sit down in front of her.

“God, this is such an amazing place,” she says. “We had some great times here. I don’t know how Crash ever gave it up.”

She still hasn’t taken off her sunglasses. I find myself missing the added emotional nuances that get telegraphed when you look into someone’s eyes. *Is Gülru feeling nostalgic? Happy? Sad?* I have no idea what she’s really thinking.

“I think the weather finally got to him,” I say. No need to bring up the fact that Crash soured on relationships with Seattle

women—with *all* women, as it turned out—after Gülru stabbed him in the fucking hand. “But what’s been going on with you?” I ask. “Your LinkedIn profile says you’re at Glamazon now.”

“Oh yeah. *That*. They’ve basically taken over my life.”

“I hope the money’s good.”

“The money’s *stellar*. I’m a rich woman now. But I hardly ever have any time to myself.”

“So you’re the voice of Galatea Voice Service?”

“Right... voice-over work has been very, very good to me.”

“What’s with the black skinsuit? Is that the latest in Seattle haute couture?”

“It will be,” Gülru says with a cocky smirk. “It’s a neural-networked exoskeleton that Glamazon’s been developing.”

“A *what*?”

“An exoskeleton.” Gülru stands up and slowly turns around, modeling it for me. “A completely flexible, wearable carapace—inspired by the ancient Japanese art of Kirigami. It combines neural-networked artificial intelligence, nanogel, and triboelectric graphene batteries to harness and amplify electrical impulses from your skin.”

Whatever it is, it’s doing a great job of showing off Gülru’s curves. If anything, she’s a touch slimmer than she used to be, but she’s still quite the sex bomb. I decide it might be wise to keep that observation to myself.

“I guess your brother never told you: I have Ehlers-Danlos syndrome.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” I admit.

“It’s a genetic disorder that affects connective tissues—skin, tendons, muscles, ligaments—all the stuff that holds our bodies together, basically. People with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome have joints that are overly flexible, which can lead to a lot of pain as we get older. We’re super-bendy, but not always in a good way. The

exoskeleton suit has freed me from pain. Plus, it has a lot of other benefits—especially with friends.”

Now that I think about it, Crash mentioned to me once that Gülru had a touch of scoliosis—a slight curvature of the spine. He also said she was extremely flexible, like one of those circus girls that can dislocate their shoulders and fold themselves up into a Samsonite suitcase. I can’t help but recall my teen fantasies about Gülru as some kind of fabulous porno-contortionist. When I’d been sitting alone in my dark room (tube sock close at hand), listening to her marathon lovemaking sessions with my brother, maybe my imagination hadn’t been so far off the mark, after all....

“What are some of the other ‘benefits’?” I ask her.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Of course!”

“The only way to find out is to try one on.”

“Can I borrow yours? My bones are feeling really bendy, all of a sudden.”

“Don’t lie to me, Derek...” says Gülru. “If anything, you’re getting stiff. But I’ve got an extra suit out in the car that might fit you. C’mon, I’ll need your help bringing it in.”

Gülru’s car turns out to be a black Tesla Roadster. It’s parked out at the curb beside my rented Nissan Pathfinder—which looks like a retarded steel donkey in comparison to the Tesla’s squid ink dark curves. Gülru pops the lid on the skinny trunk and digs out a limp exoskeleton suit. She hands it to me. Then she reaches deeper into the trunk, with both hands, and lifts out something that looks like a rubbery black horse saddle mounted on a computer server.

“Here—trade you...” she says. “This thing’s heavy.”

I hand over the suit as I grab the saddle-server thing from her. She’s not kidding—it’s surprisingly heavy. “What is this?” I ask, touching the saddle part, which feels gooey without being wet or sticky, if that makes sense.

“It’s a nanogel Sybian—again, all neural-networked.”

When my fingers pull away from the saddle goo, there's nothing on them. "Isn't a Sybian something women use to—?"

"—to get off on?" Gülru finishes for me, unabashed. "Yeah, it's good for that—*real good*—but that's not all it can do. *You'll* see..." she says as we head back into the apartment.

"I'm glad you didn't have a bullwhip in there, or I would've been worried..." I say, opening the door for her.

"We won't need whips where we're going," she promises me.

Once we're back inside, I set the Sybian down in the middle of the living room. Gülru comes up behind me, raises a hand above her head, and mimes bullwhipping my bent back while providing a surprisingly good imitation of a whip crack. "Now go get changed," she commands me, handing over the exoskeleton suit.

Oh, those wily voice-over artists....

"Oh—and put this on first." Gülru hands me crinkly cellophane package that she must have grabbed before she closed the Tesla's trunk.

Inside is a pair of black gloves and some sunglasses, just like hers, sitting on top of what appears to be a black form-fitting Speedo swimsuit. I'm thinking of the Aquablade jammers—the ones with legs—not the miniscule bikini Speedos so often seen (in eye-catching gold lamé, tiger stripes, or faux giraffe skin) stretched across the barely concealed gonads of Eurotrash rent boys on *CSI: Miami*. What's strange, though, is that the swimsuit's crotch is bulging outward like the scrotal region on a pair of tights worn by a male ballet dancer. Looking closer, I see it's made from the same gel-like substance that's on the Sybian.

"I'm supposed to wear that?" I ask.

"Just like a pair of boxers," Gülru answers, smirking again.

"Is it safe?"

"The nanogel? It's totally safe. Totally sanitary. That package came straight from the lab. It hasn't even been opened yet."

"I think you need to sit down and explain exactly how this whole thing works, before I go sticking my dick in nanogel."

“Okay. Fair.” Gülru sits down on the piano bench again.

“I don’t want little nanorobots infesting my nutsack, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, Derek, I get it. No need to be crude.”

“I’m just sayin’....”

“Nanogel isn’t like that. This isn’t about self-replicating nanobots that can turn the whole world into a pile of black goo.”

“Well, that’s a relief... because if my junk got melted into black goo, I’d be super-pissed.”

“If you knew how much time I’ve spent sitting on that Sybian, you wouldn’t be worried.”

“Are you saying you’re some kind of high-tech sex addict?”

“This goes way beyond sex. What we’re talking about is the ultimate in virtual reality.”

“I thought Facebook already had that market cornered with Oculus Rift.”

“Oculus Rift is a joke compared to Glamazon’s tech. We’re about thirty years ahead of everybody else.”

“Thirty years?” *So is this breakaway civilization technology?* I wonder to myself.

“You have no idea...” Gülru says.

“So show me,” I say.

“I will—once you put on the suit.”

I remember Catherine Austin Fitts saying that when she turned down an offer to be introduced to an alien, it was the first time in her life that she’d declined to learn about something important. I decide I’m not going to squander this particular learning opportunity. So I go down the hallway into Crash’s old bedroom and put on the suit.

“I’m feeling very Keanu Reeves right now—like I should be infiltrating a Hells Angels gang on Mars or something,” I say when I return to the living room and model the exoskeleton suit

for Gülru. It fits me like a second skin. The nanogel at my crotch feels kind of sensual... *and warm*.

“Put on the goggles,” she says.

I take it she means the sunglasses. When I put them on, the nanogel lining the frames makes a clingy, airtight seal around my eyes. It feels weird, like having garden slugs stuck to my eyebrows.

“Do these look good?” I ask her. “Or do they make my head look fat?”

“You look handsome,” Gülru answers.

I can see her through the goggles just as clearly as I’d seen her before putting them on. Better, even. The goggles seem to be subtly correcting my vision, bringing everything into sharp focus.

“Don’t freak out,” Gülru cautions me. “You might feel a little dizzy at first when the VR kicks in. The electroluminescent smart lenses in your goggles can record and playback hi-def video.” She crouches and thumbs a start-up button on the backside of the Sybian. Eight thin, flexible, black steel mesh tubes extend from the box about six feet out and then rise up like the legs on an overturned tarantula. Tiny blue laser lights blink on at the end of every tube. An inch or so below each light, twin lenses stick out like miniature versions of the lenses that used to be seen on vintage Rolleiflex cameras.

“What the hell’s up with all that?” I ask.

Gülru takes a step back, looking down at the waving tubes with admiration. “It’s an augmented reality capture device called Glamazon Narcizmo. It renders and transmits a high-def 3-D computer-modeled avatar of me while I’m sitting on the Sybian.”

I notice that the view through my goggles has turned slightly blue, like all the incandescent bulbs in the room have morphed into tungsten lighting. Sounds are also brighter and clearer.

“You’re in virtual reality mode now,” Gülru informs me.

“Looks the same to me,” I say, “only bluer.”

“Things are about to get *a whole lot* bluer from here on out,” Gülru says, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Before that

happens, though, you need to go lie down in the bedroom and lock the door behind you.”

“Why should I lock the door?” I ask, starting to get nervous.

“Because that’s the only way you’ll know for sure that I’m not in the room with you.”

“Wait, *what?*”

“Our exoskeleton suits share a Wi-Fi connection. You’ll be able to see me and I’ll be able to see you—even from behind closed doors. We’ll also be able to *feel* each other. Locking me out of the room will be the only way to prove I’m not really there.”

“Can you feel me right now?” I ask her.

“No. I need to be sitting on the Sybian.”

“And why’s that?” I ask. I think I already know the answer. This whole set-up is starting to seem wildly perverse.

“Can we be grown-ups about this, just for a minute?” Gülru puts on her grim face. “The female clitoris has over 8,000 nerve endings. It’s uniquely suited to interacting with neural-networked nanogel in a way that syncs the sensations throughout my entire body to the computer stashed in that little black box down there. Once the computer has the initial link established, you’ll be able to feel me—and I’ll be able to feel you—through the sensations picked up and amplified through our exoskeleton suits.”

“Why can’t the suits just do it on their own?” I ask, since we already seem to be deep into Philip K. Dick-ish speculative Sci-Fi territory here.

“The exoskeleton suits don’t have enough computing power yet to render hyperrealistic VR without a server connection. Notice I said *yet*. Once they do—*look out*. Humanity’s in for a total joyride.”

“Is this gonna feel like I’m cheating on my girlfriend?” I ask Gülru as I head down the hallway.

That’s entirely up to you, she says, her voice emanating from within my own skull. Apparently the stems on the goggles have the latest in audio bone conduction technology.

She's coming through loud and clear.



By the time I lock the door and lie down on the bed with the pillows tucked behind my head, I'm hearing the slinky opening bass line from Portishead's "Glory Box" through the bone-conducting goggle stems. Apparently, Gülru's VR performance will be accompanied by music. Not surprising, coming from a former radio DJ. The audio fidelity is amazing—way better than any headphones or earbuds I've listened to before.

Are you ready for me? Gülru whispers from inside my head.

"Ready," I say.

Gülru suddenly appears outside the bay window—I guess because she can. She eerily floats through the glass and across the room until she's standing over me on the bed with her hands on her hips like Wonder Woman's goth twin sister, or a dominatrix Mary Poppins. She appears as real to me, in every detail, as she did in the living room just a few minutes ago.

"Holy shit!" I say.

"Impressive, huh?" says Gülru's avatar.

"It's un-fucking-believable!"

"Well, get used to it, sport, because this is the transhumanist future standing right in front of you." She steps off the bed and sits on the mattress next to me so I can get a good look at her face.

I can see the pores in her cheeks and each individual strand of hair on her head—with no motion lag whatsoever. It blows me away when I think about what that must take in terms of real-time 3-D computer graphics rendering.

"How is this even possible?" I ask her. "We must be talking terabytes of data to render this amount of detail. What kind of a Wi-Fi network has the pipes for that?"

“Glamazon has a new Super Wi-Fi protocol they’re playing with. It’s based old Nikola Tesla tech, patented almost 100 years ago. Maximum achievable throughput is 64 terabytes a second.”

“That’s insane!”

“It’s a long way from being ready to go public. But try not to get a loop of wonder going about the technology. It’ll spoil the experience for you, if you think about it too much.”

I reach out and touch Gülru’s arm. It feels exactly as if I’m touching her real arm: my gloved fingers feel her exoskeleton suit, I feel the pressure increase on my fingertips as I pinch her biceps—and then I feel a slap as Gülru whacks my hand away.

“Hey, don’t pinch! That hurts,” she says. “You don’t know your own strength yet.”

“Sorry,” I say.

She leans over and runs a hand along the top of my thigh. “Let me show you how to feel your way around in here,” she says.

An incredible tingle follows in the wake of Gülru’s hand, as if she’s just lightly brushed the hairs on my leg. The sensation is erotic in the extreme.

“Oh man, that feels good...” I say, almost involuntarily.

“We can do almost anything you can think of,” Gülru says. “The only thing we *can’t* do is kiss. Glamazon still hasn’t figured out a way to get a layer of nanogel over people’s lips without compromising their ability to speak and making them look like that bondage slave freak—the *Gimp*—in Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*.”

Gülru must be recalling how much I admired Quentin Tarantino’s films back when I was visiting Crash in Seattle during the nineties. *Good memory....*

“Well, we weren’t planning on doing any kissing, anyway, were we?” I ask her.

“Why don’t you turn over and let me give you a massage?” Gülru suggests. “Then we’ll see how things go from there.”

“A virtual massage?”

"It won't feel virtual—believe me."

Well, why not? I think to myself. I'm still in my exoskeleton suit and Gülru is in the other room. *It's not like I'm really letting her put her hands on my body*, I console myself.

So I roll over. Gülru's avatar climbs on top of me. I can feel her weight as she sits down on my thighs. Then she leans over and starts cracking my back. I can actually hear my vertebrae popping. *Is that real—or another special effect?* I ask myself.

It sure *feels* real.

"You're carrying a lot of tension in your spine." Gülru's avatar says, leaning close to my left ear. "Does it have something to do with that ugly conversation you plan on having with Conye Best?"

"It might," I say. I can feel her virtual hair brushing against the back of my neck. And this can't be possible, but her sweet warm breath seems to be caressing my cheek.

"You can't just go storming into Bad Animals, in case you didn't know. They have some pretty tight security to get through. But I still know people there. I could help get you in."

"That'd be great," I say.

"But I'm curious... why do you need to get in there and verbally smack-down Conye in the first place?"

"It's a long story..." I sigh. Then I tell it to her.

After she gets the general outline, Gülru says to me: "So you don't really know if your girlfriend is fucking Conye or not."

"That's a blunt way of putting it, but yeah," I answer her.

The music has segued into an instrumental version of Alice in Chains' "Black Gives Way To Blue"—a song that must have some personal resonance for Gülru. I guess we've both been through our share of screwed up romantic situations.

"That's a tough spot to be in," Gülru says, kneading my shoulders. "I remember how bad I made things for your brother when I did pretty much the same thing to him. I've never forgiven myself for that. But I honestly thought I could save Layne Staley."

“By fucking him back to life?”

“That’s what I thought—that by being his 24-7 on-call fuck-nurse, I could make him feel loved. And I should probably admit that being around him made me feel special. That whole celebrity thing is so toxic, but I didn’t know that at the time. I just thought it might rub off on me. Instead, it ended up destroying the best relationship I ever had.”

“You mean with Crash?”

“*Of course* I mean Crash. Layne was a suicidal jerk. There was no way I could save him, obviously. He finally killed himself in 2002. He was so strung out on drugs by then that he only weighed 86 pounds when they found his body.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. I guess there’s no such thing as a life-saving blowjob, after all.”

Gülru thumps me on the back of my head for being a smartass. A split-second later it occurs to me that there’s no exoskeleton suit wrapped around the back of my skull—

—*so how did I feel that?*

This whole VR thing is ultra-bizarre.

Gülru goes back to stroking my ribs. I don’t know if her technique is Swedish or Shiatsu, but it sure feels good. I’m willing to cut her some slack for cheating on my brother with a drugged-out grunge rock god. *But can I forgive Pam for cheating on me with Conye?* That’s an entirely different matter.

As if she’s reading my mind, Gülru says, “Your girlfriend sounds like she’s a lot smarter than I was at her age. Maybe she’s not taken in by Conye’s whole celebrity scene. Maybe she’s just milking him for publicity.”

My whole body tenses with anger. “So you’re saying she sucked his cock to get on the cover of *VanityWeek*?”

“No! I’m not saying that at all!” Gülru covers me with her body. I can feel her breasts pressing against my back. “Calm down. What I meant to say was: ‘Maybe she saw an opportunity and

she's letting it *look like* she ran off with Conye, because she knew the publicity would be good for her UTube channel.”

“That is *So. Fucking. Cynical.*”

“How many hits did you say her latest video got?”

“Over half-a-million, last time I checked.”

“So Conye’s made her famous. You don’t think that’s worth at least a little uncertainty and heartache?”

“You don’t know Pam,” I say. “She’d never do anything that calculating.”

“Maybe not deliberately... but what if the opportunity just presented itself on the night you guys got drunk together? You don’t think she would’ve taken advantage of it?”

“I don’t know...” I say. And I really don’t. Pam has always seemed more driven than me, more obsessed with her career prospects. If Conye had needed a fake love interest to create a publicity tsunami that would boost sales of his upcoming album, would Pam have considered playing along in exchange for an exponential increase in her fan base? I don’t want to think that she’d ever do such a thing, but I can’t completely rule it out, either. I tell Gülru that.

Big mistake.

“Time to turn over,” she says.

As I roll myself over between Gülru’s thighs while she’s still straddling me, I have to remind myself that I’m only interacting with an avatar. Gülru looks and feels perfectly real. And at that moment, she’s looking particularly sexy.

“I know you had a thing for me when you were younger,” she says. “When I found out you were a virgin, I was *so* tempted to be your first. If I hadn’t been dating your brother, I would’ve done it, for sure.”

“I think that would’ve been classified as statutory rape,” I say. “Not that I would have minded... at all.”

“You used to listen to us fucking in this room, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t help it. You guys were kind of loud.”

“I was being loud on purpose,” Gülru says, putting her hands on my chest. “I *wanted* you to hear us. It turned me on, thinking about you in the next room, alone in the dark... with your hands on your hard dick. Were you thinking about how you’d fuck me?”

“Well, I wasn’t just in there reading Nabokov,” I admit.

“I was thinking about how I’d fuck you,” Gülru says, pulling on the long zipper running down the front of her exoskeleton suit. “It’s making me wet just thinking about it again. I would’ve had you wriggling and shivering on top of me like a frisky puppy. You never would’ve forgotten it.”

“I’m sure,” I say. As she unzips, I see the dense blues and orange flames of some serious *Irezumi*-style tattoo work. Then, when Gülru grasps her unzipped suit and dramatically yanks the two sides apart, I’m confronted with a raging, bloody red Buddhist daimon staring out at me from her naked torso. It has three round bulging eyes, a gaping fang-filled mouth, six arms, and a snarling dark blue lion’s face emerging from a flaming halo in the daimon’s upswept hair. I recognize it as a depiction of Aizen Myō’ō—the Wisdom King of Passion—known for transforming the violent energies of carnality and worldly lust into spiritual awakening.

I can understand why Gülru might identify with that particular dharmapala deity, but the tattoo strikes me as a bit extreme. Even her breasts are fully inked, her areolas blazing the color of Vishnu. The overall effect is not so much erotic as it is flat-out scary.

“Do you know what Terence McKenna said about drugs and computers?” Gülru asks me. It’s a rhetorical question. She answers for me: “The only difference is that you can swallow one and you can’t swallow the other—although they’re working on that. The computers of the future will act on us like drugs. McKenna said that as the Internet fades away in terms of boxes and flickering screens and shifts to increasingly transparent interfaces with our bodies, our identification with the Internet metaverse will be total. We’ll all have access to two minds: the individual and the collective.”

“That’d be old news to Carl Jung,” I tell her. “According to him, everyone can already tap into the universal unconscious. Nice boobs, by the way. I’ve never seen blue ones before—except in that James Cameron movie.”

“*Avatar*?”

“Um, yeah. Can I touch?”

“I was hoping you would.”

I reach up and fondle Gülru’s avatar breasts. *Nice*. They feel more real than real, somehow. The softness, the heft—it’s all just perfect. I experimentally pinch one of her nipples. She squirms and sits down harder on me, kind of dry-humping my crotch.

I’m getting a hard-on.

“Watch this,” Gülru says. In an instant, our exoskeleton suits disappear.

“What the fuck?” I see my penis standing straight up, framed by the shaved and tattooed V of Gülru’s naked crotch. Or at least it *looks* like my penis. It’s correct in every detail: circumcised, the right size (if anything, it’s slightly bigger than usual); it even has the little scar on the left side, just below the glans, that I acquired during a frisky adolescent encounter with the business end of a vacuum cleaner hose at the Pink Elephant Car Wash.

“Nice cock,” Gülru compliments me. “You and your brother are more alike than you even know.”

“Can we *not* talk about my brother?” I ask her. “Jesus, this is weird. Where’d my exoskeleton suit go?”

“It’s still there. The computer’s just modeling a 3-D projection of your body based on precise, near-micron-level measurements from the exoskeleton’s nanogel.”

“It seems so real.”

“It’s *meant* to seem real. That’s the whole point.” Gülru puts her hand on my cock. “Feel that?” she asks.

“Uhm, yeah... not sure I’m comfortable with that.”

She starts jacking me off. “Well, *get* comfortable with it. We’re not doing anything bad. Remember, we’re not even in the same room together.”

“*Still...*”

“I wish I could put my mouth on you, but I can’t.”

“You can’t? Really? Too bad.”

“Well, let me give it a try.”

Gülru’s avatar goes down on me. When her lips touch the head of my cock, I feel them. I don’t know how, but I feel them. And then I feel the wet warmth of her mouth as she proceeds to give me the most memorable blowjob of my life.

“How are you doing that?” I gasp. Gülru has some wicked deep throat skills. She seems to be able to unhinge her lower jaw like a python—and her gag reflex is all for show. I’m being swallowed whole, repeatedly. I watch her head bob up and down, up and down. Her virtual tongue swirls around on my virtual shaft until I’m virtually about to come.

“Gülru, stop!” I pant. “This is too much!” I feel like I’m cheating on Pam, even though (technically) I’m not.

The face of Gülru’s avatar swims up from my crotch, smiling in triumph. Before I can move to stop her, she hunches forward and straddles me, jamming my cock deep into her creamy wet slit.

There’s no difference in the sensations between virtual sex and real sex, I discover—aside from a complete lack of smells.

“God, you feel good...” Gülru moans, plunging up and down on top of me. “Do you feel how wet I am for you, Crash?”

Crash? That’s it. I yank off the goggles as Gülru shouts, “No! Don’t break the link!”

Too late. I’m back in the exoskeleton suit, flat on my back. Door locked. No Gülru. It was all VR, just as she’d promised.

Still, I feel tricked somehow. I get up off the bed and go out the door to talk to her about it. But I’m not prepared for what I find there when I look down the hallway:

Gülru is sitting on the Sybian between two tall Men in Black. One of them is holding a gun to her head. Meanwhile, the Sybian shudders like a revving go-cart engine beneath Gülru's exposed vagina, making the air-sucking electronic whirring sound of a dozen defragging hard drives.

One more grotesque detail registers: three of the flexible black tubes have attached themselves to Gülru's nipples and her navel as if they're sucking the life from her. I feel a crushing tightness in my chest as I ask, "What's going on here?"

"I'm so sorry, Derek," Gülru says with a frightened, fatigued look. "I didn't have any choice. Glamazon owns me."

The two Men in Black step toward me. Their eyes are hidden behind goggles that appear identical to Gülru's—but instead of exoskeleton suits, they're wearing Armani.

"You got your tight pants on," says the one on the left. "We're the Bewlay Brothers. I'm Iggy and this is Colin."

"Derek," I say automatically. Aiming for irony, I try to extend my arm to shake their hands, but find I'm unable to do it. The exoskeleton suit is bearing down on me, constricting every square inch of my body. It feels like I'm being shrink-wrapped.

"We know who you are," says Colin. "You're coming with us."

"Where?" I ask as the air is squeezed from my lungs. I can only exhale; inhaling has become impossible. My chest is being squashed flat.

"*Where* shouldn't concern you," says Iggy. "Haven't you noticed you've stopped breathing?"

Yeah, I was just getting around to that, you Matrix-agent-aping shitbags... I think to myself. I struggle against the suit, but it's no use. The exoskeleton is stronger than I am.

There's no panic worse than not being able to breathe. I wonder how much time I have left? *A few minutes?*

Seconds, it turns out, as I keel over like a length of cordwood and my face hits the floor.

THE BEEZOS BIRTHDAY BASH

I wake up on the Other Side with Siouxsie and the Banshees’ “Kiss Them For Me” resounding through my skull. I can’t move and I can’t see anything, so I assume I must be dead. Which sucks. If all I’m left with in eternity is some music and my memories, I’m pretty sure the ensuing boredom will eventually drive me insane. I’ll end up with Alzheimer’s of the Soul—untethered consciousness raving against the void.

To help stave off that sorry fate, I call up a mental image of Pam’s sweet face from her last video, when the instrumental version of “Kiss Them For Me” was playing on the soundtrack. But the version I’m hearing now is the “Kathak #1 Mix”—an old favorite of mine. It’s the one with samples from a Robert Anton Wilson lecture on Discordianism at the intro (“*Uh, so chaos, discord, she’s, uh... uh, she’s the chick what done it all. What comes after chaos and discord? Confusion.*”), followed by Siouxsie Sioux singing her lyrics amid a propulsive swirl of techno overdubs:

Nothing or no one will ever / Make me let you down / Kiss them for me, I may be delayed....

I remember reading somewhere that “Kiss Them For Me” was Siouxsie’s ode to Janey Mansfield, the blonde Hollywood sexpot—and high priestess of Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan—who died on the road to New Orleans when her Buick Electra

plowed into the back of a tractor-trailer rig stuck in traffic behind a mosquito fogger. Jayne and the other two adults in the car died on impact, but her children, asleep in the backseat, survived with only minor injuries (*Kiss them for me... get it?*). One of those children grew up to be an actress like her mom—Mariska Hargity, best known for her role as Olivia Benson in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

Already, the afterlife is starting to seem like one long, tedious game of Trivial Pursuit. But then I hear Gülru asking me in a staticky whisper:

Derek? Are you awake?

“Gülru! Where am I?”

You’re in a basement storage room under Jeb Beezos’ personal Nichiren Shōshū Buddhist temple on Lake Washington. Can you get up?

“No. I can’t move anything—aside from my lips. Am I dead?”

You’re not dead. Your exoskeleton suit just went into lockdown mode. Gimme a sec... I’ll see if I can jumpstart it from here.

“Where are you?”

That’s not important. Just think of me as being inside your head for now. I’ll be seeing through your eyes, hearing what you hear. But you won’t be able to see me this time.

“Why not?”

If you see me, you might give me away. I’m not supposed to be doing this.

“You mean talking to me?”

Helping you. I’m trying to make up for what those assholes made me do to you earlier.

“Iggy and what’s-his-name?”

Colin. The Bewlay Brothers. Shit!... this isn’t working.

“What’s not working?”

Jumpstarting the suit. If it's any consolation, you're bulletproof right now. When the nanogel is molecularly aligned with the graphene battery layers in lockdown mode, it's stronger than Kevlar.

"Good to know, but nobody's shooting at me."

That could change at any minute. The Bewlay Brothers are assassins. Honestly, I'm surprised they've kept you alive 'til now.

"How long was I out?"

About eighteen hours. After you did your faceplant, they stuck a needle in your neck and put you into a chemical coma. Then they sent me deep underground. That's why I can't unlock the suit—our Wi-Fi connection isn't strong enough. If you weren't in lockdown mode, I wouldn't be able to talk to you at all.

"Can't you move someplace to get a better signal?"

I'm a prisoner here. They won't let me back aboveground until this whole thing is over. We'll have to increase the signal strength some other way. Can you get a hard-on?

"You're joking, right?"

No. Think of it as a booster antenna. Remember, our main link is through our genitals. That's how it always works with new technologies. First they explore the military applications. Then they use the sexual applications to sell it to the public.

"Like free porn to lure people onto the Internet."

Exactly. Exoskeleton suits and immersive VR will be the next big leap in the transhumanist agenda. In ten years everyone will be doing this. So let's just finish what we started.

"I'm not sure I can do that, Gülru."

Why not? Don't I turn you on anymore?

"It's more that I just don't trust you. I feel like I've been punk'd. Like Ashton Kutcher is behind this whole thing, waiting to jump out at me wearing one of his stupid backwards trucker hats."

Ashton doesn't do that anymore. C'mon... you need to get it up if you want to get out of there. Should I talk dirty to you?

"You mean, like, have exoskeleton bone-phone sex with me?"

Sure... I'll do anything to get you hard.

"Anything?"

Anything.

"The last time I got a hard-on for you, I almost died."

Not my fault. I had a gun pointed at my head. Remember? This time, it's just me. Just us. Do you have any idea how close I was to getting off before you broke our connection? Even with a gun at my head, I was ready to explode all over that big steely cock of yours.

"Virtually."

Not just virtually. I'll let you fuck me in real life, any time you feel like it. I want to fuck you, Derek. Just looking at you makes me want to spread my legs and have hot, nasty animal sex with you. I'll do things to you that no woman's ever done before.

That does it. *Houston, we have lift-off....*

With a fluid unlocking, the exoskeleton suit returns to perfect functionality.

Ha! Gülru gloats from inside my head. I knew I could do it! You got hard, didn't you?

I'm reminded then that Gülru is a world-famous voice-over artist. Faking emotion is part of her job description.

I start to wilt.

Don't go soft again, she warns me. You need to stay extra hard to maintain our connection.

"How am I supposed to do that?" I ask her. "I'm not mainlining Viagra here, y'know."

I'll keep talking dirty to you while I manipulate the nanogel in your crotch. Just try not to jizz all over yourself, okay? That'd kill your boner for sure. And we need it.

"As a booster antenna."

Right.

An invisible hand caresses my crotch. I sit up with a start.

Oh, don't act so shocked. You know you like it, Gülru purrs between my ears. Now... you need to get up and find the door. Then you need to go through that door and introduce yourself to Jeb Beezos.

"Jeb Beezos? Are you fucking kidding me?"

If he didn't want to meet you, you'd already be dead.

"What the hell am I supposed to say to Jeb Beezos? We don't exactly have a lot in common."

Well, it's his birthday, so be nice to him. Somehow, you'll have to convince him to call off the Bewlay Brothers. Otherwise, they'll end up killing you for sure. It's what they do.

"Okay. Great."

There's a party going on outside. You probably won't find Jeb right away. You might have to mingle for a while.

"Mingle. That's one of my least favorite words in the English language."

Call it networking then, if that makes it more palatable. Just go out there and act like you belong. Who knows? You might even make some new friends.

"I don't need any new friends," I grumble.

No, you probably don't, now that you have me.

"Yeah, with friends like you..." I leave the cliché hanging as I feel Gülru's invisible avatar wrap her arms around my shoulders in the dark. Slowly, sensuously, she lowers her naked body against mine until I feel the weight of her moist slit bearing down on the head of my cock. She slides it in and then slowly drags it out. The pleasure is intense, like being engulfed in the velvety slime of an abnormally large snail's throat (pardon the gross analogy, but that's what it feels like, I swear...).

Glamazon's nanogel continues to impress the hell out of me.

That's all you get for now... Gülru's voice is low and sultry. From this point on, I'll still be able to talk to you, but you'll have to remember not to talk back to me. It'd give us away.

"Got it," I say.

Now go out there and find Jeb Beezos. You know what he looks like, right?

“Sure. He’s like a droopy-eyed Lex Luthor—or Mr. Clean’s runty kid brother.”

Gülru snorts out a laugh and gives me a final warning: *Whatever you do, don’t tell him I sent you. Jeb wouldn’t like that. I know for a fact that he pounds his pud in the shower to my voice coming out of his Glamazon Gecko whenever Mrs. Beezos isn’t home.*



I feel like a Zen pervert, skulking around in a Buddhist temple with a rock-hard erection distending my nanogel underpants. Fortunately—after I find the door and climb the stairs into the light—I see that I’m wearing a black silk samurai kimono over my exoskeleton suit, which helps hide the bulge.

I sneak past incense smoke, shimmering brass gongs, and chanting monks in saffron robes. Near the center of the temple, I see a fat black stone Buddha that’s at least three times larger than life. This particular Buddha (or anti-Buddha) is wearing glasses. Its face is old and evil-looking. It puts me in mind of Alan Greenspan in blackface, pretending to be a “dandified coon” in an Al Jolson-led minstrel revue. It sits in a lotus position between two enormous round wooden pillars painted Chinese green with slashes of gold leaf *kanji* characters carved into them at eye-level. Looking at them, I’m reminded of the twin pillars from the front porch of Solomon’s Temple: Boaz and Jachin. These could be their Japanese Masonic Lodge equivalents.

I feel self-conscious, but no one seems to be paying any attention to me. Someone once told me that Nichiren Shōshū believers are considered more avaricious than other Buddhists, more singularly focused on getting ahead in this life and the next. They’ll chant to their *Gobonzons* for anything—even a new Porsche Boxster or a trip to Las Vegas.

Maybe one of them chanted to become the top executive at a publicly traded company with a market cap of over two hundred billion dollars.

Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō, motherfuckers... I think to myself as I leave through the temple's front entrance. *I'm off to meet the Emerald City Wizard.*

A late afternoon lawn party is in full swing outside the temple. Pristine white tents have been erected along the extensive green grounds overlooking Lake Washington. It's like a Bedouin camp for snooty sheikhs. Caterers scurry about in rented tuxedos balancing silver trays on their outstretched palms, offering crystal flutes of champagne to the assembled luminaries. I nab a glass for myself and take a sip. It's the good stuff.

The International Trade Union Confederation may have named Jeb Beezos the World's Worst Boss at their 2014 World Congress, but at least he doesn't cheap out when it comes to boozing with his birthday guests.

Beyond the tents—high on a lush, bamboo-covered hill—sits a mansion that looks like a Seattle architect's spin on a drug lord's ultra-luxe island fortress from an old Bruce Lee movie (*Enter the Dragon*, if memory serves...). A concert stage has been set up at the base of that hill and an audience has gathered there, so I head in that direction.

As I get closer, certain people begin to stand out from among the crowd of pretty wives and paunchy, pale-faced men. There must be plenty of investment bank presidents and heads of major multinational corporations that I'm not recognizing, but I'm pretty sure I see Barry Diller and Diane von Fürstenberg talking to Bono and The Edge on the perimeter of the crowd. Closer in, I see Elon Musk having a quiet but intense argument with a super-hot girl with a British accent (I'm guessing she's English because she just told him to stop acting like a toff...). Over to my left, Jay Z (aka Hova) is sharing a joint with Sir Richard Branson. And off to my right is the famous Larry Ellison—CEO of Oracle, owner of the island of Lanai, and my buddy Skelly's #1 Scourge. He appears to be comparing facelift notes with a tall,

distinctive blonde in high heels who has an enormous rack and big fat collagen lips that make her look as though she might pitch over at any moment—

—just like she did when she got drunk and horned in on a Madonna interview with Kurt Loder for MTV's New Year's Eve broadcast ten or twenty years ago.

On my second take, I realize I'm staring at Courtney Love.

Those lips look like they have a lot of miles on 'em... Gülru snarks from inside my head. *Did you ever hear Courtney brag about her magic pussy, how every guy she screws turns into a superstar? Maybe you should take her up on that.*

Since I can't talk back to Gülru, I make a low gagging noise like I just threw up in the back of my throat.

Just kidding. I can't stand her, either. But check out Elon Musk's wife, Talulah. She's hot. Looks like they're having a fight. Maybe you can slide in there and convince her to go off with you for a revenge fuck.

As if to emphasize that last point, Gülru manipulates the nanogel at my crotch so it feels as if I'm fucking her while standing up.

"*Gah!*" I shout, caught off-guard. I immediately cover my nose with my hand to make it look as though I've just sneezed. Elon and Talulah glance over at me and then go back to arguing.

I hear Gülru snickering inside my head. *This is fun!* she says. *I wonder if I could give you a prostate massage while you're talking to Bono and Barry Diller. Should we find out?*

I just clear my throat and walk in the opposite direction. Gülru deploys the nanogel to give my crotch a final squeeze and then she lets up.

An array of brilliant white strobe lights suddenly illuminates the concert stage. It's like an explosion without sound. I turn to watch as a morbidly obese black woman waddles out, center stage, wearing nothing but a sumo wrestler's white loincloth (or a *mawashi*, as it's known to sumo wrestling fans). She's twirling a red-padded sledgehammer above her head while she does the

traditional sumo foot stomping business, lifting one foot and deliberately hunching it forward before she moves the other. She stops and twerks after every two or three steps. Going by her looks and size, I'm guessing she might be the same woman who appeared in that infamous twerking performance with the demented teddy bears that Miley Cyrus pulled off at the MTV Video Music Awards a few years ago—although I can't be sure.

An enormous brass gong has been set up in the middle of the stage, suspended in a wooden frame resembling a Shinto shrine. The monstrously fat sumo woman lumbers over and strikes it with the padded sledgehammer, of course. The gong resounds across the width and breadth of Jeb Bezos' glitzy estate. If anyone in the audience wasn't paying attention, their eyes are glued to the stage now.

A hidden stage platform begins to descend, taking the sumo wrestler woman and the gong out of sight beneath the stage. An eerily distorted recording of a marching band kicks off through the stage's speaker stacks—some druggy John Philip Sousa crowd-pleaser jerked around in Auto-Tune—as a phalanx of gorgeous *Victoria's Secret* worthy models appears from behind a parting white curtain in back. They're all clad in identical black leather jogging pants and Nazi jackboots. And they're all topless. As they advance in a goose-stepping V-formation, each model whacks a black riding crop against the thighs of the model in front of her. Their movements are perfectly synchronized. It's like watching Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*—with tits.

Hey, look! It's your rapper arch-nemesis! Gülru observes from inside my head.

Sure enough, Conye Best has taken the stage. He's out in front of all the topless models with a wireless microphone clenched tight in his fist. I have no idea how he got up there. One second there was nothing on the stage except a military parade of Nazi hooters and the next there's fucking Conye in his glam astronaut getup: red Adidas booties, silver-gray military camouflage spacesuit with matching overcoat (for those cold

nights on the dark side of the Moon, I guess), and a mirrored helmet designed by Maison Martin Margiela.

Maybe he beamed down from the Roc-A-Fella version of the Starship Enterprise.

Conye starts stalking back and forth, hunched over like a muscular wild animal pacing its cage. “I might not be the richest person here today,” he shouts into the microphone, in an unusual (for him) fit of self-abnegation. “I might not be a billionaire. I might not even sell the most records. But I speak from my heart every time I open my motherfucking mouth.”

The crowd cheers.

“Today we’re here to pay a tribute to Jeb Bezos. I call him *sensei*. I know a lot of you do, too. He’s been a teacher to all of us. That man can sell the shit outta anything. We’re talkin’ sales revenue of over a hundred billion dollars last year. That’s goddam *net*, people. In the world of retail, Glamazon is king. And we all know that in this predatory universe of ours, it’s good to be king. It don’t pay to be prey.”

The crowd cheers again as Conye shouts, “*So Happy Birthday, Jeb! This one’s for you!*” Then he launches into a mesmerizing rap version of David Bowie’s “The Man Who Sold The World.”

As the performance rips along, a giant erect penis rises from the hidden platform at the center of the stage. Or at least that’s what it appears to be at first. But as it rotates, the audience sees that it’s really the oversized bald head of Jeb Bezos on a life-like sculpture over sixty feet tall. The Bezos sculpture is posed like an Oscar statue, only instead of being all gender-neutral nude and polished gold, it’s wearing a gargantuan version of the same samurai kimono that I have on.

Who knows? / Not me / I never lost control / You’re face to face / With the man who sold the world....

Unlike the real Jeb Bezos—who’s completely bald—a Shaolin monk’s queue of fraying black hair sprouts in endless braids from the back of the Bezos sculpture’s head. When the sculpture has risen to its full height, the jackbooted models pick

up the loose ends of the braids and start dancing around the Beezos sculpture like pagan Scandinavian girls circling a Maypole.

Who knows? / Not me / We never lost control / You're face to face / With the man who sold the world....

By the end of the song, the Beezos sculpture is completely wrapped in braids like a repulsive black mummy. The models do a synchronized bow of supplication to it. Then they mime jilling off and leave the stage. A split-second later, Conye vanishes in a giant cloud of celestial bong smoke as the hidden gong resounds from beneath the stage.

Witchcraft! Black magick! Gülru shouts from inside my skull.

I can't tell if she's joking.

"Kurt did that song better," I overhear Courtney Love saying to Larry Ellison. He agrees with her, but says Conye has the better stage show.

"You never would've seen Jeb Beezos turned into a big black cock at a Nirvana concert," he points out.

Beezos! I think to myself, recalling Conye's pet name for his penis. *Of course!*

Gülru says to me between my ears: *You need to get backstage, fast, if you want to catch Conye before he leaves.*

I push my way through the crowd toward the stage. Near the front, I bump into Mariah Carey and Beyoncé (aka Beysus) wearing matching "Do What Thou Wilt" cashmere hoodies while bouncing around like a couple of excited schoolgirls. Mariah scowls at me as I go past her. I think she might have just mistaken me for my brother.

When I try to go around the side of the stage, I'm met by a contingent of beefy security guards in black T-shirts. They look like former Navy SEALs, or maybe Israeli commandos. One of them points a police baton at my chest and says, "No one gets backstage without a pass."

That's Seth, says Gülru. Tell him you're meeting me. He'll know who I am.

"I'm supposed to meet Gülru back there," I tell the guy. "She said you'd let me in. Your name's Seth, right?"

"Yeah, that's me." Seth secures his police baton in a loop on his black cargo pants and picks up a clipboard. "Did Gülru put you on the guest list?"

Tell him to look at what you're wearing, Gülru advises me. That's your backstage pass right there. Tell him Jeb gave it to you. Act like you belong there.

"Do you see what I'm wearing? Jeb Beezos gave this to me."

One of the other security guards butts in: "Sensei only gives those out to people he trusts. Let the dude through."

"Okay, fine..." Seth says, giving the other guy a hard look. He sets the clipboard aside and hands me a backstage pass on a thin nylon cord. "But no asking for selfies with Conye or Limn. That's their rule, not Jeb's. Say 'Hi' to Gülru for me."

"I will. Thanks." I head on my way.

It sounds like Conye and Limn are still hanging out together, after all. I hope that turns out to be true, for Pam's sake as well as my own.



"Derek! Over here!" Limn shouts, waving to me from a crowd of well-groomed people gathered under a white caterer's tent.

"Limn! It's so great to see you again," I say, going over to her. She gives me a big hug. It feels genuine and warm, reminding me again that despite her tacky TV reality show fame, Limn is a fundamentally nice person.

“God, you must be freaking out about that stupid *VanityWeek* cover,” she says, looking straight into my eyes. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“So it’s not true?” I ask her.

“Of course not! I’ve been with Conye the whole time. But we can’t control what the tabloids say about us. My mom made us sign contracts that exempt *VanityWeek* and a bunch of other big media companies from lawsuits, no matter what kind of lies they tell about us.”

“Why would she do that?”

“For money and fame, of course. Why else?” Limn looks at me as if I’m being deliberately obtuse.

Conye appears at my side, wrapping a strong arm across my shoulders. “Hey bro. We haven’t done it yet, but me and Pam might still have sex,” he jokes. “I made that bitch famous.”

“I sure she’ll be thrilled to hear that,” I say. “Do you have any idea where she is?”

“No fuckin’ clue,” Conye swears with a shake of his head.

“I haven’t seen her either,” says Limn.

“I’m really worried,” I say. “I still haven’t heard from her.”

“Did you go to the police?” Limn asks me.

“Yeah, but they’re worse than useless. They were convinced that Pam had run off with Conye even before the tabloids came out with that same story.”

“Media does everything they can to break artists’ spirits,” says Conye, sympathizing. “That’s why I do everything I can to break media. I hate the way they control people with low self-esteem, with improper information, with branding, with marketing. I refuse to follow those rules. It’s about truth, bro. It’s about information. I’m more of a messenger than a rapper.”

“Did you read that story that came out about us yesterday?” Limn asks me. “They said I’m divorcing Conye because he’s gone crazy and he’s 53 million dollars in debt.”

“But you’re not?”

“Divorcing? No way!” Limn kisses Conye full on the lips, as if to prove her point. “But if you’re asking if he’s crazy, I’d have to think about it. I might say *Yes*.”

“They say I’m crazy, but that’s the best thing going for me,” says Conye. “Name one genius that isn’t crazy. I am the free nigga archetype.”

“What about the debt?” I ask. “Is that just more media manipulation to beat down on your self-esteem?”

“No, that shit’s true,” Conye admits. “For the past three years people who knew about the debt have tried to use it against me in negotiations.”

“He spent all that money on his fashion lines, bringing his beautiful ideas to the world,” Limn puts in.

“But I’m still personally rich,” says Conye. “I can buy furs and houses for my family because my personal assets are kept separate from the VC funding and bank loans for my fashion business. I could just default on all that debt, if I had to, and my personal assets and savings would be protected.”

“We have some really good financial advisors,” Limn says.

“I guess you must...” I say, thinking about how the rules are always different for the über-wealthy, compared to the rules for regular folks like myself. I also recall J. Paul Getty’s cynical words of wisdom: *If you owe the bank \$100 that’s your problem. If you owe the bank \$100 million, that’s the bank’s problem.*

“I still gross over a million per concert,” Conye boasts. “I’ll even get two hundred thousand for that birthday song I just did. Jeb Bezos doesn’t care. A few hundred K is just pennies to him.”

“We’re trying to get Jeb, Mark Zuckerberg, and Larry Ellison to put up a billion dollars each so Conye can keep making art,” says Limn. “There’s a good chance we’ll get it, too. That’s why we’re here.”

“So we’re close to seeing the light of day. Series A funding, bitches. That’s where it’s at.”

“I overheard Larry saying how much he liked the show,” I mention, even though Conye probably doesn’t need any more fuel for his ego.

Conye nods, as if his preposterous narcissism expects no less. “Just like Larry and Jeb, I will be the leader of a company that ends up being worth billions of dollars because I got the answers. I understand culture. I am the nucleus.”

“Speak of the devil...” says Limn as Larry Ellison approaches Conye with his arms held wide for a hug.

“*Connnyeeahh!* You sly dog! Turning Jeb Beezos into a BBC was a stroke of pure genius! I’m sure he was flattered.”

Conye and Larry exchange elaborate bro handshakes and then hug like old friends.

“Well, I wouldn’t use the word *flattered*,” Jeb Beezos says, walking over to us from the opposite direction. “But I was in on the joke. From one Beezos to another, I thought it was pretty funny.”

Jeb lets loose with that famous braying laugh of his—the laugh that has terrorized Glamazon employees since the company’s inception. At times, the Beezos laugh has been known to express genuine amusement, but often—too often to count—it’s been the prelude to one of his legendary put-downs (such as: “Do I need to go down and get the certificate that says I’m CEO of the company to get you to stop challenging me on this?” or “Are you lazy or just incompetent?”). Those “nutters”—as the employees call them—are often followed by someone getting fired on the spot.

The laughter stops just as suddenly as it started.

“Who are you?” Jeb asks, staring at my samurai kimono, which happens to be identical to the one he’s wearing.

A crushing sense of inferiority slams through me like a tidal wave. Jeb’s harsh gaze makes me feel like I’ve accomplished nothing of value in my life—certainly nothing worth fifty billion dollars. I have no idea what I should say to the great and powerful Beezos. I wait for Gülru’s prompting, but then it occurs

to me—and only then—that my hard-on has retreated. I feel dickless. Our connection is broken.

“I’m Derek Swannson,” I say, reaching out to shake his hand.

“Derek Swannson... really.” Jeb looks at my extended hand as though it’s covered in jism. He refuses to touch it.

“Derek’s cool,” Conye vouches for me. “He’s a writer. I met him in New York.”

“I know he’s a writer. My wife has read his books.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, I guess I should thank you for selling them for me,” I say.

“That’s not up to me,” Jeb scowls. A large blue vein pulses on the side of his forehead. “If it *was* up to me, your books might not be selling at all.”

“So you’re not a believer in the rights to free expression and a free press?” I ask, puzzled by his hostility.

“Sure, in theory... just not at my company.”

“But your company accounts for two-thirds of all books sold online these days. Why should one man have the power to censor two-thirds of what the world reads?”

“Did you take your stupid pills today?” Jeb asks me. “I have that power because it’s *my* company. If you don’t like it, you can go sell your books somewhere else. Try Barnes & Noble... but at the rate they’re burning cash, they’ll be bankrupt in a few years, just like Borders and Waldenbooks—so good luck with that.”

“*Jeb, Jeb, Jeb...* why so hot-headed today?” Larry Ellison asks, reaching over to embrace his bald little friend. He towers over him: 6’3” to Jeb’s puny 5’6”. “You don’t always have to act so tough...” Larry tells him. “You’ve proven enough to that alcoholic unicyclist who missed out on being your father.”

“Fuck off, Larry,” Jeb says in a muffled grumble, his bulbous nose buried in the armpit of the Oracle CEO’s bespoke suit.

“Did you know that Steve Jobs, me, and this wonderful guy here all started out as orphans?” Larry asks us, peering out over

the top of Jeb's head with red-rimmed, watery eyes. "Three of the most successful tech entrepreneurs the world's ever seen, and we were all adopted. How nuts is that?"

Jeb breaks the hug and practically growls into his friend's face: "You're high, Larry. Get the fuck out of here. Go molest one of your Ukrainian interns or get back to your Hawaiian island. I have business to take care of."

Larry plants a kiss on the top of Jeb's shiny skull and raises his arms in an "I surrender" pose. He walks backward out of the tent, red-eyed and cackling. He seems to enjoy getting a rise out of his mega-billionaire buddies. The next time we see him, he'll probably be talking smack to Sir Richard Branson.

"Larry's such a sweetie," says Limn.

"Yeah, definitely not the book-censoring type," I say.

"This isn't the place for this," Jeb turns and snarls at me. "If you want to talk about your precious freedom of expression, you need to come with me. *Now*."

"*Whoa...*" Limn says, under her breath.

"Derek, did you do something to antagonize our sensei?" Conye asks me. "Because if you did, it's not safe for you in the zoo. Know what I'm sayin'?"

I'm getting the sense that Conye is trying to send me a coded message, but I have no idea what it means. *Is he referring to our late-night trip to the Central Park Zoo?* I wonder. *There's no zoo around here, is there?*

"This doesn't concern you, Conye," Jeb says. "We'll get together and settle up later. Thanks for the show." He walks out from under the tent. When I don't immediately follow, Jeb looks over his shoulder at me and says, "Are you coming?"

For the second time in the last 24-hours, I decide I'm not going to decline an opportunity to learn about something important.

I just hope it works out better for me than it did the last time.



A couple of those goofy stand-up Segways are parked outside the tent. Jeb mounts one and motions for me to get on the other. I've never ridden a Segway before, but I find out it's pretty easy. You just lean forward and go. I follow Jeb up the smooth green hill to his fake Yakuza fortress. He gets in a few cool slalom turns and tries to put some distance between us, but I keep up with him. I'm feeling competitive.

After we park the Segways on his terracotta helipad (or his massive outdoor patio, or whatever), Jeb ushers me inside through a tall, sculptured bronze door with a numerical keypad lock that looks like it came straight from the Apple showroom. Judging by the outside of the mansion, I expect to see a lot of tatami mats and maybe some elaborately carved water dragons on the walls, but the first room inside the mansion is nothing like that. The walls are some kind of stark glassy white material lit from within and the ceiling is pitch black and as high and wide as a cathedral, so the blackness seems to ooze out of view. The floor is a vast black-and-white checkerboard of polished marble tiles known as mosaic pavement—or Moses Pavement (as any 33rd Degree Freemason could tell you...). There's nothing else.

I take that back. There *is* something else. Jeb pulls out a tiny key fob remote and clicks on it. A twenty-foot square section of tiles in the center of the room slowly descends beneath the floor's surface, soon to be replaced by a raised square platform with a thick surface of sand-strewn clay built on top of a base of tiny, tightly packed hay bales. I realize it must be a sumo wrestlers' platform when a set of hidden elevator doors in the back wall open up to reveal the huge twerking black woman who struck the gong on Conye's concert stage. She crosses the distance at a waddle and then hefts herself up onto the platform to stand glaring at me with her big, meaty hands patting her steatopygic thighs.

"Welcome to my *dohyō*," Jeb says, putting an Alice Cooper *Welcome to My Nightmare* spin on the words.

“Will I be wrestling for my right to free speech today?” I ask him, joking.

“You could say that, yeah.”

That wasn’t the answer I was expecting.

“Have you met Black Betty yet?” Jeb asks me.

“Um, no. We haven’t been formally introduced.”

Black Betty is still wearing her sumo wrestler’s *mawashi* and nothing else. I raise my hand and wave a fey hello. She responds by turning around and presenting me with her gargantuan black butt cheeks. They look like twin Hefty bags full of rocks and wet oatmeal. Black Betty proceeds to twerk in a baboonish show of contempt. Or maybe it’s the start of a primitive mating ritual, but the vibe I’m getting seems a lot closer to contempt.

Then she lets out an explosive fart: loud, low, long, wet, and mean. The back of her *mawashi* clouds brown.

Contempt confirmed.

“No way am I wrestling that woman,” I say to Jeb.

“You will,” he says.

“She must outweigh me by at least a hundred pounds.”

“Two hundred, easy. But you’re still doing it. Otherwise I’ll have the Bewlay Brothers kill you right here.”

The hidden elevator doors slide open again to reveal the Bewlay Brothers—still in their badass Men in Black suits and face-hugging VR goggles. They’re both screwing silencers onto nasty-looking handguns.

“Hey! Iggy! Colin! Never send a human to do a machine’s job, right?” I shout, sending them a friendly wave.

They ignore me.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask Jeb.

“I’m doing it because I don’t like what you write,” he says. “I find your books insulting to me and my friends.”

“You mean you and your whole pack of rapacious, deranged oligarch friends? Is *that* who we’re talking about? Because I’m pretty sure you must find it hard to relate to normal people, now that your personal net worth is equal to the gross national product of Slovenia.”

“*See?* That’s why you’ll never get ahead in life. Not only won’t you suck up to your social betters... you’re ungrateful for what we’ve already done for you.”

“Aside from distributing every crap consumer product that the world has to offer, at prices that sometimes beat Walmart, what have you done that should I be grateful for?”

“What have I done? Your puny income barely met your living expenses until I tweaked the algorithms to get your books selling. I own you, punk.”

“The *fuck* you own me. We’re both making money off my books. You can tweak your brainy algorithms right back the other way if you don’t like it. Go sell some more sulky teen vampire romances if that’s what turns your crank. See if I care.”

“Maybe I will,” says Jeb, grim-faced. “And maybe, while I’m at it, I’ll have my good friends at Oogle de-index you from their search engine. But you’re still wrestling Black Betty.”

“Oh hell. Just kill me now.”

“That can be arranged.”

“I can’t believe you...” I say in disgust. “Your whole company was built on the backs of authors. You take a cut from every book ever written. But you’ve been strong-arming publishers into giving you such deep discounts that it translates into smaller authors’ royalties. And when it comes to *used* books, you get paid, but the authors don’t.”

“Why is that not fair?” Jeb asks me. “The discounts benefit our customers. And authors don’t have to share in the expense of building and maintaining a massive, complex e-commerce site that ships their books all over the world.”

“No, but if those authors hadn’t written books that people wanted to read in the first place, your world-crushing online bookstore never would have made it out of the gate. And now you’re using the same shitty grift to go after music and movies, hijacking the income streams that rightfully should be going to the original creators and redirecting the profits into Glamazon instead. In a just world, that never would’ve been allowed to happen. The parasitical content distributors shouldn’t be getting rich while the content creators go broke.”

“Get real,” Jeb says. “Capitalism isn’t about justice—it’s about arbitrage. Your margin is my opportunity. Justice is what the suckers cry for when they’re on the losing end of a deal.”

“That right there is the problem, you haughty dipshit. There’s too much of this ‘I got mine and now I’m taking all of yours’ mentality going around. And by the way, just because Glamazon made billions exploiting the creative work of others, that doesn’t give you the right to censor books and eliminate any author that pisses you off. What’s next? Mass book burnings? Firebombing libraries? Is that why you named your e-book reader the Kindler?”

“Oh wow! Like I’ve never heard *that one* before,” Jeb says, oozing sarcasm. “You’re giving me *so much* to think about. Maybe I’ll bring up your ideas at the next board meeting: ‘Hey, guys, Derek Swannson has decided we should divert all of Glamazon’s profits into a philanthropy project to reimburse those wimpy, shit-sucking creatives we’ve been exploiting.’” Jeb hits me with that braying laugh of his again. When it stops, he says, “I just don’t see that flying, do you?”

I slowly clap my hands. “What can I say, Jeb? All that money must mean you’re smarter and more deserving of it than anyone else. Why should you even pay taxes on it, much less redistribute it to benefit anyone aside from you and your scumbag capitalist pals? The greedy bastards who own the world think they should be allowed to govern it, because they’re God’s favorites. So pull the trigger, you fucking egomaniac, because your God obviously isn’t mine.”

“Are you done yet?” Jeb asks me.

“I think so... yeah.”

“Good. Now go wrestle Black Betty.”

Black Betty stands oblivious to our conversation, smearing a glistening drizzle of Johnson’s Baby Oil all over her bulging black boobs from a 20-ounce squeeze bottle. The effect is similar to what I imagine a hippopotamus would look like after passing through the hot wax sprayers at the Pink Elephant Car Wash.

Wait! The Pink Elephant Car Wash? Site of my youthful vacuum cleaner hose transgressions....

Now I have a plan.

“Okay, sure, I’ll wrestle the lovely Black Betty,” I say to Jeb. “You can just kill me later, if she doesn’t get around to it first.”

“Good man!” says Jeb, clapping me on the back. “Go meet your black anima. Wrestling with her is psychic alchemy. *Albedo! Nigredo! Rubedo!*”

The reality-warping presence of a celebrity mega-billionaire so distorts the normal functioning of the human brain—well, *my* brain, at least—that I feel perversely pleased to have made Jeb Bezos happy. But that only lasts a millisecond. Then I remember that he’s a self-serving fuckstick who just sentenced me to certain death.

“Crush his bones, Betty,” Jeb instructs his fat sumo factotum. “No, wait!” he says, grabbing my forearm as we approach the edge of the platform. “Take off the kimono before you climb up there. I don’t want it to get greasy. It might fit someone else.”

I drop the robe, revealing the black exoskeleton suit beneath.

“Holy shit! Who gave you that?” Jeb asks, unable to contain his astonishment.

“We did,” answers one of the Bewlay Brothers. “The order came from below.”

“Well, take it off! That suit represents billions of dollars in off-the-books research at Blue Orgazon.”

Before Jeb can stop me, I leap up onto the platform and say to Black Betty, “C’mere and gimme a hug!”

Black Betty shies away from me, but I go right at her. When her retreating feet touch the edge of the clay platform, it seems that her autonomic sumo wrestler reflexes kick in. She hurls herself forward and grabs me in a full-body clench. It’s like getting tackled by the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. We stagger back to the center of the platform. Then, because she’s so oily, I squirt right out from under her flabby arms.

“*Shit! Stop! Stop! Stop!*” I hear Jeb shrieking as I crab-crawl through the crevice between Black Betty’s bowed legs.

Black Betty squeezes her knees together and squats, summarily crushing me. I try to squirt free again, but my exoskeleton suit is caught on her shit-stained *mawashi*. My plan isn’t working. I need more time to concentrate.

“Get off him! *Christ!*” Jeb shouts.

I don’t know what she’s thinking, but Black Betty’s massive undercarriage doesn’t budge an inch. She seems determined to keep me trapped.

With enormous effort, I manage to roll sideways and up to get some wiggle-room. I’m still caught between Black Betty’s squishy thighs like a human sausage, but now I can shimmy back and forth a little. That’s all I need. I close my eyes and start envisioning all the times I’ve made love to Pam—all those times when I couldn’t get enough of her, when that feeling of skin-on-skin was all I wanted, jammed up tight against her, kissing her, with my cock way up inside her tight, wet...

That does it. By using Black Betty’s flab as a stand-in for Pam, I’ve managed to get a hard-on again. Mission accomplished.

Gülru’s voice is back inside my head, saying: *Jesus, Derek, it feels like you’re getting shit out of an elephant. Where are you?*

“*Dohyō!*” I croak. I open my eyes and take a look around so Gülru can see what I’m seeing through my VR goggles while she administers an emergency nanogel handjob.

Omigod, I never would've thought Jeb would take you into the dohyō! Whatever you do, don't get in the elevator. Do you hear me? Shout 'Yes' if you do.

"Yes!" I half-shout. It comes out kind of muffled because my face is getting pummeled by Black Betty's orgasmically twerking buttocks. I guess I'm not the only person here grooving on the greasy friction.

Gülru gets my message, anyway. *Good!* she says. *Don't let the elevator take you down. Remember that. Now... I'm about to ramp up the power to your exoskeleton suit. You'll be able to toss off Black Betty when I do. After you get free, run for it. The Bewlay Brothers will come after you, but I'm hoping you'll move faster than they can.*

That doesn't sound good. They have guns—and I don't.

As if she's reading my mind, Gülru says, *If they shoot at you, duck. The exoskeleton suit is bulletproof, but your head's not. That's where they'll be aiming. If they hit you in the ass a few times, it'll sting, but it won't kill you. Sorry... but that's the best I can do. You're not Neo and this isn't The Matrix. You won't be able to stop bullets in mid-air. If you can, try to grab Jeb and use him as a human shield. They won't shoot then.*

Now GO!

I feel a jolt of unnatural energy surge through my arms and legs. With seemingly superhuman strength, I lift Black Betty up by her spasming crotch and toss her sideways—a solid four hundred pounds hefted with no more effort than shouldering a beanbag chair. When Betty hits the clay, it crumples beneath her, spreading cracks, like the desert floor getting struck by a boulder (and a flattened Wile E. Coyote) in an old Road Runner cartoon. She lets out a low moan that sounds like postcoital bliss.

I take a quick glance around as I get to my feet. The Bewlay Brothers are still over by the elevator, raising their guns to firing position. Jeb is rapidly backing away toward the bronze door we came in through.

I jump off the platform and sprint after Jeb.

He turns and runs. In three great strides, I cover half the distance between us. Then I hear the first bullet whiz past my right ear. One of the glassy white wall panels implodes in front of me. I duck and keep running. More bullets. More implosions. Then a bullet smacks straight into my ass. The pain is so intense that it launches me off my feet. I go tumbling, turning cartwheels through the air like a bull-struck rodeo clown.

The back of my head slams against the marble floor and I go skidding on my back across the black-and-white marble tiles.

“Crap! I’m hit!” I yelp.

Before I can get my bearings, Jeb Beezos leans over me, grinning like a ghoul. He pulls back his kimono sleeve and makes a fist. Then he plunges his staticky bare arm deep into my solar plexus—just like Conye did on the night of our aborted trip to the Central Park Zoo.

With a terrifying sense of *déjà vu*, I feel the life force ebbing out of me into the black hole that is Jeb Beezos.

I’d gotten around to thinking of that episode in the tunnel with Conye as a full-blown hallucination. Apparently, it wasn’t. This is a Loosh heist if there ever was one. Even with the exoskeleton suit’s power boost, the energy is being sucked out of me so rapidly that I don’t have the strength to raise my arms.

I hear Gülru screaming inside my head: *Get up, Derek! You have to get up! He’s killing you!*

I try that spiritual *ju-jitsu* move I learned the last time—leaning into the whirling torrent of Jeb’s negative energy to spin the Divine Spark of my own positive energy into an opposing tornado of white light fetched down from my immortal soul—but it’s not working this time. The black-and-white marble tiles are somehow keeping my Divine Spark pinned to the floor.

Fuck!

Jeb starts in with his incredibly annoying donkey laugh again. *What a bastard!* Why is it that so many political leaders and CEOs turn out to be psychopaths? And why do we keep voting those intraspecies predators into positions of power,

allowing them wreak hell on the world's economies and the environment?

Is it because we secretly believe the same capacity for evil resides within each of us?

Are the rest of us just too shy to let the monster out?

Or are we essentially good people, unwilling to harm others?

Shit, I'm dying.

Only a few seconds left now. Soon, there won't be enough energy left to keep my heart pumping. And then where will I go, if my Divine Spark is pinned like a butterfly to Jeb Bezos' Grand Chessboard floor?

At that moment I feel the Bewlay Brothers grab my ankles. "Let up on him," one of them says. "Big Y wants him alive."

"Why?" Jeb asks as I feel his staticky arm snake out of my abdomen.

"No reason given. You can ask him yourself." They start dragging me toward the elevator.

Not surprisingly, my flab faked-out boner is MIA. I've lost my connection to Gülru.

I watch the elevator doors slide open. I'm so weak that I can't muster any resistance. The Bewlay Brothers drag me straight in. One of them—Colin, I think—deliberates over the elevator buttons and then presses them in a certain order, like he's punching in a security code.

The elevator begins its descent.

It seems to take forever. It's a long, long way down. It feels like we're plummeting down a mineshaft. Down past the sewers, past the Earth's crust, on toward the mantle—all the way down, straight into hell.

Which is not a bad guess, as it turns out.

HELLO ILLUMINATI!

The lower we go, the more my energy level rises. As I lay motionless at the Bewlay Brothers' feet during the elevator's seemingly endless descent, I can feel my psychevoltage reknitting itself like a self-healing polymer.

Maybe I wasn't as close to death as I'd thought.

By the time the elevator finally lurches to a halt, I'm almost back to normal. I tell the stooping Bewlay Brothers that I think I can walk. They seem to doubt me, but they drop my ankles and lift me up by the armpits to check it out. I feel dizzy at first—and my butt cheek is still throbbing from where the bullet bounced off me—but I manage to stay upright after they let me go.

"Where to?" I ask them.

"We'll be taking the path to the left," says Iggy.

One thing to be said about hell, if that's where they've taken me: it's not all fire and brimstone. If anything, it feels cold—like they have the thermostat for the air conditioning set too low. The air is kind of thick and hard to breathe. Another complaint: they skimp on the lighting down there. It's like trying to find your way around in the Washington, D.C. underground Metro system, only darker.

The same stingy mole people probably designed both places.

As the elevator door closes behind us, the electroluminescent smart lenses in my VR goggles make an automatic exposure adjustment. Everything gets brighter, but my overall view goes slightly green and granular, as if I'm looking through really good night vision binoculars.

Oh no! You're here... Gülru whispers inside my head.

I make a happy grunt to demonstrate how glad I am to hear her voice again.

Whatever you do, don't talk to me, or they'll soul-murder us both, she warns. *But I can be your Virgil. The Wi-Fi is strong down here in the Moho. I'll be able to guide you—and maybe even help you escape, if you can ditch the Bewlay Brothers. Right now it looks like they're taking you to Chapel Perilous to see Yaldabaoth.*

Yaldabaoth? I want to shout. *The hostile Demiurge the Gnostics wrote about? So all that stuff is true?*

But I keep my mouth shut. Like most architects, I'm pretty good at following instructions. I just keep limping along with the Bewlay Brothers down a long corridor that looks like it was airlifted out of the USCSS *Nostramo* in the *Alien* movies. Or, again, it could be an underground Seattle cousin to one of those dark commuter platforms in the D.C. Metro system built by stingy mole people—

—*or Archons*—

—*or the Deros*, as described by Richard Sharpe Shaver.

All kinds of fucked-up possibilities are occurring to me.

When we get to the end of the corridor, it opens up into an enormous stalactite-dripping cavern lit by a kind of permanent blue twilight. I can't identify the light source. Everything seems to be glowing with a soft blue charge of static electricity—something like the blue lightning that crackles off a Tesla coil, only more diffused. The stalactites are crazy-beautiful. Imagine the world's largest pipe organ hanging upside down from a rock ceiling, half-melted, and bathed in a Prussian blue fog of sparks.

Salvador Dali's paintings have nothing on this.

The cavern is so big that St. Patrick's Cathedral could easily fit inside it. In fact, a strange and opulent structure about that size stands dead ahead of us.

That's Chapel Perilous, Gülru whispers as my eyes travel from its white marble base all the way up to the tip of its ruby red steeple.

It's impressive, like something Zaha Hadid might have designed using the latest advances in Parametricism.* Chapel Perilous looks like what you'd get if Zaha and her team had been collaborating with Hieronymus Bosch and H.R. Giger while tripping on bad acid—creepy on a massive scale, but also somehow glorious. A fine example of avant-garde mole people architecture.

Get ready, Gülru says to me. *You'll be plugging into psyshevoltage that you may not be rated for. Most people who enter Chapel Perilous just trip their mental circuit breakers and that's it. Game over. So try to hold onto your proverbial shit, okay?*

I covertly acknowledge Gülru's instructions by saying to Colin and Iggy, "Okay... so where are you guys taking me now?"

"Chapel Perilous," Colin answers.

As if I didn't already know.

"You're supposed to meet some people in there," Iggy elaborates. "That's the only reason you're still alive. If it had been up to Jeb—" He just lets that thought hang.

"Well, I appreciate how you've held yourselves back," I say as we approach the chapel's entrance. "You guys've shown a lot of restraint by not just blowing my head off."

I've been pretty much resigned to my own death since Jeb introduced me to Black Betty in his dohyō. It's liberating, in a

* Parametricism is an architectural style that uses parametric equations and fancy computer algorithms in a self-referential system, so all the design elements seem to sinuously interlink. Check out Zaha's Dongdaemun Design Plaza in Seoul, South Korea, if you want to see a good example of how it works.

sense. A lot of your usual, day-to-day concerns fall away when you write yourself off as already dead.

“It doesn’t matter now,” says Colin, sounding petulant. “Once you enter Chapel Perilous, you’ll never find your way out again.”

I’ll get you out. Don’t worry... says Gülru.

“Great!” I say as we step across the threshold into the chapel’s narthex. “So what is it, like, a big maze or something?”

“Worse,” says Iggy. “It’s the externalized answer to the Great Question.”

“Which Great Question is that?” I ask, playing the straight man.

“The only question: Why are we here?”

“I’m here because a fat lady sumo wrestler tried to squash me and then two guys in spiffy suits shot me in the ass and dragged me down here in an elevator.”

“What he means is: Why do we exist?” Colin clarifies for me. “Why is there consciousness instead of nothingness? What’s the point of being alive?”

“Oh...” I say. “Good question. And Chapel Perilous has the answer?”

“Yeah—but you won’t like it.”

The Bewlay Brothers turn away from me, smirking, and head back out across the chapel’s threshold. “This is as far as we go,” Iggy says. “You’re on your own from here.”

“Aw, I’m gonna miss you guys.”

As I turn to watch them leave, the chapel’s heavy metal doors slam shut in my face. I watch in astonishment as the metal liquefies and all the seams disappear into a mirror-smooth surface. My reflection alternates between looking surprised and annoyed. I guess I won’t be getting out the same way I came in.

I turn back around. Beyond the narthex, I see an empty nave that resembles the inside of the Methodist church I used to

attend when I was growing up in Kingsburg. Same rows of worn wooden pews, same white marble chancel. Behind the altar, there's a long curved wall known in architect's lingo as an apse. It's draped with purple satin stage curtains. I don't see any exits, unless there's a secret passageway concealed behind the curtains. I decide to go find out.

Derek? Are you still with me? Gülru asks inside my head.

"Um, yeah!" I cough into my hand.

Good! You still can't talk to me. They're listening. But I wanted to warn you... from here on, a lot of the things you see will be coming from your own memories and perceptions. Not everything is real. Chapel Perilous has a way of tapping into your deep unconscious. Don't ask me how. No one's ever explained it to me. Just be aware of it so you don't freak out, okay?

I nod my head and go up the chancel's marble steps. A big, crusty black book is splayed open on the altar. It doesn't look like a Bible. Its pages are spattered with black mold and the edges are ragged with burn marks. I flip to the front cover to see if it has a title.

Shit! It's the Necronomicon!

I drop it like it's contaminated.

Okay, okay... I mentally calm myself. That's probably just me. I shouldn't have read all those H.P. Lovecraft stories when I was a kid.

Yeah, I saw that, too, Gülru says. Lovecraft is an incredibly bad influence. You better hope you don't run into Cthulhu....

I head past the altar and part the purple satin curtains, revealing a long, red-carpeted hallway behind them. The lights are low. I can't make out where the hallway ends, so I go through the curtains to see what I can find.

The walls on either side of me look like old diorama backgrounds from a natural history museum. They've been painted in trompe-l'œil to fool the eye into thinking it's looking out from a path through a high mountain forest. I see jack pines and blue spruce, clumps of hellebore and henbane, red-capped

mushrooms and mossy rocks scabbed with sunflower-yellow lichen. For verisimilitude, fir needles and pinecones have been scattered along the edges of the carpet.

There's nowhere else to go, so I head down the hallway, marveling at the hyperrealistic detail painted on the walls. To my left, a black timber wolf stares out at me with glowering ice-blue eyes and bared fangs. The shadowing is so perfect that for a moment I think it must be a taxidermied version of the real thing. But no, it's all a painting. A few steps further, a painted white wolf stares out at me from the opposite side of the hallway, but somehow it seems friendlier, less intent on ripping my throat out.

I keep walking. The high mountain vista morphs into a desert landscape: saguaros and blue agave, peyote and jimson weed, sunning Gila monsters and coiled rattlesnakes. Drifts of sand replace the pinecones at the carpet's edges. Dancing between the cacti, I glimpse a man with pointy ears and greenish, warty skin. When I stop to stare at him, he's obviously just a well-executed painting. But as I keep walking, he seems to follow me in my peripheral vision. Again, I stop and stare. He's frozen in place—a painting on the wall—but he's in a different position from the last time I saw him. I look down the hallway. No other warty green men are to be seen. But again, as I start walking, the green man follows at the edge of my vision. Then I remember his name from the books I've read by Robert Anton Wilson and Carlos Castaneda:

Mescalito.

Have I been sipping on a mescaline frappuccino in some alternate universe? Or is Chapel Perilous just tweaking my reality through the VR goggles?

I take off the goggles and look around. Nope, Mescalito's still there. And I'm still standing in a hallway deep within Chapel Perilous. Everything's the same, only darker. Much darker.

Fuck, Derek! Gülru complains after I put the goggles back on. Quit fooling around! If those VR goggles get lost or broken, I won't be able to guide you out. Now say goodbye to Mescalito and go to the end of

the hallway. You'll find a door there with a sign above it. Go through the door and I'll tell you what to do next.

Okay, fine... I think, still not entirely sure I can trust Gülru. I finger-wave bye-bye to Mescalito. He breaks into a warty-lipped grin and finger-waves back at me. The mirror-like symmetry is perfect—or it would be if I had some sort of a low-grade Creature from the Black Lagoon skin disease. *Weird*. It freaks me out a little, so I take off at a run.

My ass still hurts as I lope down the hallway, but I ignore the pain. I'm out of breath by the time I reach the end. Just like Gülru said, there's a door—and a glowing pink neon sign above it spelling out:

FOR MADMEN ONLY

I recognize the sign as an old Hermann Hesse trope from *Steppenwolf*. That's what I get for having literary ambitions, I suppose. The books I've read over the years make up a huge part of my mental landscape.

Someone behind the door shouts, "Get in here, Derek! Don't be shy!" So I turn the knob and go inside.

Don't freak out, Gülru reminds me. *They won't hurt you. You're here to learn.*

I find myself in a corporate boardroom. Disconcertingly, the windows to my left and right look out onto clear blue sky, as if we're high up in a skyscraper. But that's far from the weirdest thing going on. At least twenty people are seated in black leather office chairs around a long rosewood table. I recognize at least half of them, but their skin pigmentation is off.

Jeb Beezos, for example, is standing at the head of the table, but he's Black Jeb Beezos. He's still short and bald, but now he looks like an uptight black man. But no, that's not quite right... he's more like a minstrel parody of a "dandified coon"—like the Alan Greenspan Buddha upstairs. Jeb seems to be wearing blackface. But if that's the case, his makeup is flawless. I flash on

Robert Downey Jr.'s role as a chitlins-chewing Negro soldier in the movie, *Tropic Thunder*.

That's the kind of blackface I'm seeing—only darker.

Just as unsettling, Conye Best has a seat at the table and he's white—almost albino white, with a platinum blonde fade. He grins and waves. Going around the table, I also recognize Elon Musk (black), Paul Allen (blacker still), Bill Gates (the very darkest Nigerian kind of black), Howard Schultz (Starbucks coffee black, no cream), Jay Z (nearly as white as Bill Gates is in real life), Beyoncé (still kind of tan-colored, but a little blonder and more Stepford Wife-ish than usual), and Larry Ellison (deep black and really seeming to dig it...). They're all wearing the same samurai kimonos that Jeb and I had on earlier.

Hey, look! There's Macklemore! Gülru exclaims. He finally got to be black, after all....

"Macklemore? What the fuck?" I say without thinking. An African-American version of the famous pale-faced Seattle rapper turns around in the seat immediately to my right and gives me a big thumbs-up.

Shit, I thought he was one of the good guys....

"Derek! So glad you could join us!" says Black Jeb Beezos.

"Welcome to the Illuminati, bro," says White Conye, still grinning like a friendly State Farm insurance agent.

Jeb breaks out with that braying laugh of his, but somehow it sounds deeper and more soulful, less grating than usual.

"What is this, a convocation of the breakaway civilization's fake-Negro wizards?" I ask them. "What're you guys supposed to be? Archons? Black magicians?"

"Hey, don't be racist," White Conye cautions me.

"Right. Sorry, Conye. You look like a white devil down here. Black magicians... what the hell was I thinking?"

"As above, so below," Jeb Beezos says like he's laying some deep profundity on me, not just parroting Hermes Trismegistus.

“Every king of culture who walks in daylight is ruled by a corresponding shadow underground.”

“*Albedo! Nigredo!*” everyone at the table shouts.

“So let me see if I’ve got this straight: You’re the astral mind-fuckers from hell who yank the chains on your yin-yang twins roaming around on Earth.”

“That’s a gross oversimplification of our extra-dimensional meddling,” Black Jeb Beezos sneers at me, “but yeah—we call the shots.”

“And your agenda is... what? Pure Evil?”

“No more evil than the farmer who milks his cows every morning,” Black Paul Allen puts in.

“Seriously? You and Big Black Bill Gates here were the guys responsible for foisting Windows on the world. You can’t exactly compare that to a dairy farm.”

Black Bill Gates vigorously nods his head and says in his Kermit the Frog voice: “Sure you can. Microsoft products milk money from people while causing them endless amounts of frustration—and when people feel compelled to spend money on products that frustrate them, it produces Loosh.”

“*This is fucking awesome...*” Black Macklemore says through clenched teeth, pantomiming the rattled sarcasm of a Windows user. “I’ve had to reboot my laptop six times today! Goddam you Bill Gates, you billionaire bastard!”

“That’s mother’s milk to us,” Black Paul Allen says, lewdly licking his lips.

“If your primary aim is to be Loosh harvesters, then the whole Microsoft product line suddenly makes a lot more sense,” I concede. “And Jeb, we all know what a fantastic Loosh-milker *you* are: Glamazon is the Great Enabler, doing more than just about any other company to turn the world’s irreplaceable natural resources into disposable junk products that nobody really needs, while off-loading the toxic industrial waste into places inhabited by the poor and defenseless.”

“Yeah? Well, think about all the trees that died to publish your asinine novels,” Black Jeb shoots back at me.

“About 98% of my sales are e-books. You can have one of your Glamazonian flunkies look it up, if you don’t believe me.”

“I will,” he promises, “but your book-selling days are already over, you scurrilous jackass.”

“We’ll see...” I say. “Hey, thanks for popularizing e-books, by the way. That’s *one* good thing you did.”

“You’re welcome. *Finally!* A little respect....”

“Too bad all those trees you saved from being turned into books just ended up getting pulped into cardboard boxes instead, so you could ship your Glamazon crap all over the planet.”

“There’s no winning with you, is there?”

“Probably not. I’m just not cut out to be a cheerleader for the Illuminati. But here’s the thing I don’t get: Why is the music industry so heavily represented down here?” Turning to White Conye and White Jay Z, I ask, “What’s up with that, Great White Rappers? Care to explain yourselves?”

“I’m still kind of new around here, bro,” White Conye begs off. “Maybe someone else can explain it to you better.”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Black Jeb says to me. “Music is a really great tool for mass mind control operations.”

“Word,” says White Jay Z, raising his large pale hands to display the Roc-A-Fella Sign. Looking at me through it, he frames his left eye in the negative space that forms a pyramid between his thumbs and forefingers. Is it meant to be a variation on the Illuminati’s most widely recognized sigil—the All-Seeing Eye in the floating pyramid capstone on the back of the dollar bill (derived from the ancient Eye of Horus, aka the Eye of Tehuti, aka Thoth, aka Hermes Trismegistus)?

I don’t know... *maybe*.

“Everyone listens to music,” Black Jeb continues, “especially young, impressionable kids. And almost no one thinks very hard about the content. It’s easy to slip subliminal messages in there:

backward-masked prayers to Satan... power ballads telling you to get high and screw your high school gym coach... insinuations that Paul is dead... *whatever*. The songs we like the best get turned into Top Forty hits. Our man at iHeartMedia really helps out there. Have you met Bob Pittman?"

Black Bob Pittman nods his bearded chin from the far end of the table, acknowledging me with a wink.

"Hey, Bob... didn't you used to be with Clear Channel?"

"Same company," Black Bob informs me. "We just changed the name because it was getting a bad rep for programming insipid crap 24-7."

"Yeah, it's hard to find a decent song on the radio these days, thanks to you guys buying up all the stations. iHeartMedia... cute name for a company devoted to satanic propaganda and Loosh harvesting."

"No worse than Obama calling his big gimme to the health insurance industry the Affordable Care Act."

"I guess the Archons are in charge everywhere."

"You got *that* right, son. It's a wilderness of grift out there."

"Yaldabaoth has arranged a special meeting for you in the Choronzon Room," Black Jeb tells me. "Henry and David took an underground maglev train all the way out here from the East Coast just so they could show you how our operation works. George couldn't make it."

"George who?" I ask.

"George Herbert Walker Bush. Frankly, I don't know why they're going to all the trouble, but that decision's not up to me. If Big Y wants to give you an education, you'll get an education."

"And Big Y—or *Yaldabaoth*—is the, um... Demiurge?"

"That's one way of putting it," says Black Jeb, "but I think your girlfriend knows him as Clonenhoof."

“Oh hell no!” I say. Everything suddenly clicks into place in a way that makes me feel crushingly depressed—and somewhat scared, in a Kierkegaardian fear and trembling sort of way.

“Oh hell yes...” Black Jeb says, mocking me with his droopy eyes held open wide.

“Is she here?”

“Who? Your girlfriend? I have no idea,” says Black Jeb. “You can ask Yaldabaoth. You’ll meet him soon enough. But Henry and David need to prep you first. So if you’ll just walk around to my end of the table here—and go through that door behind me—you can be on your merry way. And we’ll be able to get back to business.”

“Good seein’ you again, bro,” says White Conye, giving me a fist-bump as I walk past him.

Well, that wasn’t so bad, was it? Gülru asks inside my head.

You didn’t read what Clonenhoof wrote to Pam... I think to myself. But if I could talk to Gülru, I’d admit that seeing White Conye and Black Macklemore in the Illuminati corporate boardroom made me feel less alone—and less vulnerable, somehow. I have a hard time thinking of those two as entirely evil. This whole Illuminati/Archon thing doesn’t seem so black-and-white to me anymore.

I’m starting to see some shades of grey.

CROSS-EXAMINATION IN THE CHORONZON ROOM

The Choronzon Room looks like the War Room from Big Stan Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Or at least that's my first impression. The obsidian floor has been polished to such a high sheen that it looks like a black lake of oil. Enormous concrete walls descend in a wedge from a height of about a hundred feet at the entrance to around thirty feet at the back, suggesting a brutalist bomb shelter. In the center of the room sits the world's largest poker table. It's covered in green baize and lit from above by a corresponding circle of hanging lamps. Fifty or sixty people sit around it in the same black leather chairs I saw in the Illuminati corporate boardroom. They look like they're meeting to decide the fate of the world over a game of cards.

Glancing around the table, I see dozens of familiar faces with the same inverted skin pigmentation flaunted by Black Jeb Beezos and his Seattle collaborators. But this is a more international crowd. I recognize Archon versions of Vladimir Putin, Queen Elizabeth II, Benjamin Netanyahu, Zibigniew Brzezinski, Rupert Murdoch, Roger Ailes, Barack Obama, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Michael Chertoff, L. Paul Bremer, Hillary Clinton, Ben Bernanke, Larry Summers, Handsome Hank Paulson, Lloyd Blankfein, Jamie Dimon, Vikram Pandit, Warren Buffett, Carlos Slim, Evelyn de Rothschild, and the Koch Brothers, just for starters. I can't come up with names for

most of the Asian and Middle-Eastern VIPs I'm seeing (aside from Kim Jong Un and Bandar bin Sultan...), but they're there, too.

And I'm thinking to myself: *How much of this is coming from me—and how much of it is just how things really work down here?*

There's no way to tell.

Two old black men get up from the table and walk over to where I'm standing. The shorter and fatter of the two is wearing thick Poindexter glasses. Even before they introduce themselves, I know they're the Archon doppelgängers of Henry Kissinger and the world's oldest living mega-billionaire, David Rockefeller.

"Are you the young man we're here to initiate?" Black David Rockefeller asks me, extending his shaky, age-spotted hand. His voice is soft and polite, almost British—or so it seems to me.

"He's that despicable bastard from the Invisible College," Black Henry Kissinger tells his old friend in that gravelly Teutonic accent I grew up listening to on the evening news. "They're using him as a Herald, but Yaldabaoth thinks he might be a candidate for our side, once he gets to know us better."

"A Herald! He shouldn't even be here!"

"No one's ever called me a Herald before," I say. "I'm just a guy who designs houses and writes books. But you're right: I don't belong here. This isn't my usual scene."

"I'm sure Yaldabaoth has his reasons..." Kissinger says with a twitch of his pointy black ears. "He knows more about the future than we do."

Here's what I know about Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller: In my mind, they personify the militarization and financialization of America. Aside from a few other key players—like the Dulles Brothers; the Bush, Morgan, Rothschild, and Du Pont families; and the three Big Dicks (Helms, Nixon, and Cheney)—over the last fifty-odd years Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller have done more than just about anyone to spearhead U.S. imperialism and the amoral mayhem that always follows in its wake. To put it bluntly, they've used war and economic hit man tactics to weaken or overthrow democratic

governments (including our own), at the cost of millions of innocent human lives, all just to maintain the Deep State's predatory investments throughout the world. If that's not the very essence of fascism, then I don't know what is....

The Rockefeller/Kissinger tag team got its start at the Council on Foreign Relations in the mid-fifties when CFR Chairman John J. McCloy "discovered" Kissinger and installed him as the CFR's study director in foreign policy. The Rockefeller Foundation was providing the bulk of the CFR's funding in those days, so Kissinger soon became acquainted with David Rockefeller, who would later succeed McCloy as the CFR's chairman from 1970 to 1985 (while also founding the Trilateral Commission in 1973 and serving as the only member of the Advisory Board for the Bilderberg Group from its inception in 1954).

Kissinger and Rockefeller had both been military intelligence officers during World War II—so they had that in common. Soon, Kissinger was serving as Rockefeller's personal foreign policy aide, advising him on investment opportunities in politically roiled nations. At Rockefeller's behest, Kissinger started feeding inside information from the Paris peace talks to the Rockefeller, Dulles, and Bush families' slinking-dog protégé, Richard Nixon, during his 1968 presidential campaign.

Kissinger's spying prompted Nixon to deploy right-wing China Lobby activist Anna Chennault¹ as a back-channel to convince South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu not to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks, just when President Johnson was thinking that a peaceful resolution to the Vietnam War seemed achievable. Nixon's sabotaging of that diplomatic initiative to end the conflict in Vietnam—a treasonous offense in violation of the Logan Act—would result in four more needless

¹ Anna Chennault (referred to by Nixon staffers as the Dragon Lady) happened to be the widow of Lieutenant General Claire Chennault, the founder—with E. Howard Hunt and Paul Helliwell—of the drug-smuggling Taiwan-based CIA front company, Civil Air Transport, later known as Air America. So the Octopus rears its ugly head here, yet again. *Nice work, Tricky Dick!*

years of war costing the lives of 20,763 American soldiers and a million or more Vietnamese and Cambodians. But it made the Democrats look weak and thus paved the way—along with the convenient assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King—for a Nixon win in the 1968 presidential election by a margin of less than one percent of the popular vote.²

Upon taking office, Nixon offered control of America's finances to David Rockefeller in the form of the U.S. Treasury Secretary post, but Rockefeller passed—perhaps anticipating that he'd find being chairman and CEO of Chase Manhattan Bank a more personally enriching experience. Kissinger, however, pounced on the offers to be appointed Nixon's National Security Advisor in 1969 and then the 56th U.S. Secretary of State in 1973.

The rest is Deep State history.

When Kissinger commenced the secret carpet-bombing of Cambodia in 1969 without consulting Congress, he set the precedent for illegally bombing countries that aren't at war with the United States (a precedent Hillary Clinton made full use of years later, with the bombing of Libya, when it was her turn to play Secretary of State). By the time U.S. forces finally withdrew from Vietnam, 2,756,941 tons of ordnance had been dropped on Cambodia (far more than the approximately two million tons of bombs that had been dropped by the Allies, in toto, during

² Taking a page from Nixon's dirty tricks playbook, George H.W. Bush resorted to similarly treasonous tactics during the Rockefeller/Kissinger-precipitated Iran hostage crisis. Bush and his team of loyal CIA buddies (like Bill Casey and Ted Shackley) sabotaged President Carter's negotiations to repatriate the 52 U.S. embassy employees seized in Tehran, making it easier for the Reagan/Bush team to win the 1980 election. Then, twenty years later, Bush the Younger won another tainted presidential election—he actually lost the popular vote to Al Gore, but the Supreme Court decreed Bush President, anyway—which resulted in those two neocon ghouls, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, being set loose on the world again (after that distrustful duo's first high-profile appearance in Nixon's Office of Economic Opportunity, in 1969; and later, in the administration of the Deep State's useful idiot, Gerald Ford). This time around, Cheney and Rumsfeld coordinated the 9/11 attacks using the Continuity of Government planning group's secret communications network (developed to address the threat of a government wipeout in the event of a nuclear first strike); then they deployed their mind-fucking distortions and lies to lead the U.S. into costly, pathetic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Halliburton and aspartame über alles!*

World War II) killing at least 100,000 civilians—and probably far more, according to most estimates.³

For Kissinger, that was just a genocidal warm-up exercise. He also secretly bombed the crap out of Laos. He supported Pakistan's genocide in Bangladesh (where death toll estimates ranged from 300,000 to 3 million). He backed Suharto—by some measures, the most corrupt leader in modern history—when that embezzling President of Indonesia invaded East Timor (slaughtering between 100,000 to 200,000 people out of a population of just over 800,000). Kissinger also gave the go-ahead to coups and death squads throughout Nazi Rat Line plagued Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia...) where democratically-elected leaders were tossed out—with a big assist from the CIA—in favor of pathological dictators who ruled by murdering and torturing anyone who dared to disagree with them.

As for David Rockefeller... *shit*, where do I start? How about the family tree? His great-grandfather, William “Devil Bill” Rockefeller was a notorious horse thief, bigamist, serial rapist, and purveyor of quack cancer remedies—a literal snake oil salesman. Devil Bill's son, John D. Rockefeller—the Rothschild-financed chairman of Standard Oil—was a ruthless monopolist who, by 1880, owned or controlled over 90 percent of all the marketable oil in the United States, making him the world's first billionaire and the world's second richest man, ever, when his net worth is measured in 2007 dollars (only Nathan Mayer Rothschild beats him out, at \$450 billion to Rockefeller's \$374 billion; Bill Gates and Warren Buffett's recent wealth, combined, doesn't even come close).

³ It certainly didn't help when the Khmer Rouge rose to power in the wake of all the shit and disaster wrought by Kissinger. By the CIA's own intelligence estimates, the U.S. bombing campaign was a key factor in the Communist-affiliated Khmer Rouge becoming Cambodia's ruling party in 1975, when Pol Pot's forces captured Phnom Penh. In the four years that followed, Pol Pot presided over a totalitarian dictatorship that caused the deaths of another 1 to 3 million Cambodians that Kissinger hadn't been able to get around to carpet-bombing. *National Insecurity State blowback strikes again!*

John D. Rockefeller's only son—John D. Rockefeller, Jr.—became a director of Standard Oil while simultaneously serving as a director at J.P. Morgan's U.S. Steel company. He married Senator Nelson W. Aldrich's daughter, Abby, in 1901 and raised six children with her, among them David, UFO-chasing Laurance, and Nelson—the four-term GOP Governor of New York and the nation's Vice President during the brief reign of Gerald Ford. The family connections to J.P. Morgan and Senator Aldrich assured that the Rockefellers would be major beneficiaries of the secret plan conceived on Jekyll Island in 1910 to create the Federal Reserve System⁴—an elitist scam that handed over control of the U.S. economy to a cartel of international bankers. That scam probably ended up benefitting David Rockefeller the most, in his role as chairman and CEO of Chase Manhattan Bank, the largest credit card issuer (read: *financial bloodsucker*) in American history.

As Lloyd Marrsden described the passage of the Federal Reserve Act in my first book: *"The American public has been whipsawed for gigantic profits from pre-engineered bouts of inflation and deflation ever since. Wars, recessions, even Presidential elections—*

⁴ The Jekyll Island plan was concocted by Senator Nelson Aldrich; National City Bank (now Citibank) president, Frank Vanderlip; First National Bank of New York president, Charles Norton; former Harvard economist and Director of the U.S. Mint, Dr. Abram Platt Andrew; Henry Davison and Benjamin Strong (both representatives of J.P. Morgan); and Kuhn, Loeb & Co. partner, director of Wells Fargo & Company, German citizen, and Rothschild family representative, Paul Warburg. Their plan came to fruition with the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, which forces the U.S. government to borrow money from the Federal Reserve System and pay it back with compound interest, rather than printing its own interest-free money backed by government-owned silver or gold. The Federal Reserve is a privately-owned banking system that operates as a criminal syndicate; it's not part of the federal government and it has no reserves. Some economists have called it the biggest robbery ever enacted on the American people. The specious argument advanced by the international bankers was that the Fed would help stabilize the U.S. economy. Of course, that's not how it played out. The outbreak of World War I was made possible with funds from the newly minted U.S. Federal Reserve. Then came the Agricultural Depression of 1920. Then, the Roaring Twenties—when the rich got richer, and the poor got the shaft, as usual—followed by the Black Friday Crash of October 1929 that led to the Great Depression, and so on, up to the present day.... *Way to go, banksters!*

the Fed controls it all with monetary policy, our economy's magic elixir."

The situation was made even worse when the "Nixon Shock" suspended direct convertibility of the U.S. dollar into gold in 1971. Thanks to Nixon (goaded on by his rich friends like the Rockefellers) by 1973 the dollar had become a free-floating fiat currency, which—as history shows—never ends well. The money the Fed issues today is totally notional—created on a computer—and the national debt the U.S. has been accumulating since the rigged financial crisis of 2008 is out of control and unpayable, unless the nation chooses to scale back its military budget (way, way back) and start taxing the rich again (unlikely, after the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision to let corporations buy elections).

In the meantime, our massive, exponentially-growing national debt is doing a fine job of allowing the bankers to steal real wealth and property from the American people with the financial legerdemain of higher taxes, higher debt loads caused by stealth inflation (in medical care, insurance, real estate, and college costs, etc.), decreased spending on public schools and our national infrastructure, and the looting of Social Security and Medicare funds, among other neat tricks.

"Austerity measures" is what the bankers call that.

In short, the inexorable militarization and financialization of America is stripping the country of its assets, leaving the economy with less ability to produce a surplus from which to pay its usurious creditors, and lowering the standard of living for all but a few elite, intraspecies predators—

—like the ones seated around the table and standing right in front of me in the Choronzon Room.

Derek? Gülru says to me from within my overstimulated brain. *You kind of zoned out there. Kissinger just asked you a question.*

I flinch and refocus. "I'm sorry, what'd you just say?" I ask Black Kissinger. With all that Kissinger/Rockefeller history

bouncing around inside my head, I must have looked like a mute, standing zombie for a few seconds there.

"I wanted to know if you had any questions for us," Black Kissinger says with a perturbed look on his face. "Yaldabaoth has authorized us to tell you the truth about how we operate. Does that interest you?"

"Of course! Can I ask you anything?"

"Anything at all," Black David Rockefeller says, sounding paternalistic, reassuring.

"Okay then." I decide to start off in left field. "How 'bout you start by telling me the truth about aliens, 9/11, and JFK?"

"You're not afraid of the fringe stuff, are you?" Black David Rockefeller says with a chuckle.

"It's not fringe to me," I say. "I think it's central to what's been going on for the last hundred years."

"And you would be correct in that assumption," Black Kissinger tells me, "although I was hoping, instead, that you'd ask me how I enjoyed dating Shirley Maclaine, Diane Sawyer, and Candice Bergen," he jokes.

"He likes to go around saying 'Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac,'" Black David Rockefeller reminds me, "but I've always thought it was money."

"You would," I say. "So c'mon, you guys... quit stalling. Who killed JFK?"

"Oh, well, a lot of us did," Black David Rockefeller answers with an elegant shrug. "It was a team effort. I guess I got the ball rolling when I had that meeting with Allen."

"Allen Dulles?"

"Yes, the former Director of Central Intelligence... a good man to have in your corner. Allen's brother, Foster—the former Secretary of State—happened to be married to my father's first cousin, Janet. I also knew the Dulles brothers from Sullivan & Cromwell—where Standard Oil was a major client—and from meetings at the Council on Foreign Relations. So... one day I

was complaining to Allen about Kennedy's softness on foreign policy. His bumbling had allowed Castro to expropriate our Standard Oil refinery and other Rockefeller-owned properties in Cuba. Kennedy was also getting in the way of our investment opportunities in Latin America. As I was explaining all that to Allen, he sat there puffing away on that pipe of his, and he finally said: 'I don't like that sonofabitch, either.' And I knew just what he meant, because Kennedy had fired him a few years earlier over the Bay of Pigs fiasco."

Black Kissinger fills in: "He also fired Allen's friend, Charles Cabel—the Deputy Director of CIA—whose brother, Earle, happened to be the Mayor of Dallas. It was Earle who helped us change the Presidential motorcade route when Kennedy went there on his fatal visit."

"Who would've guessed?" I say.

"In some ways, it didn't matter that Allen had been fired," Black David Rockefeller explains. "All the top CIA men were still loyal to him. Dick Helms, Jim Angleton... they still thought the world of Allen. They had a lot of shared history, going all the way back to the war. So when Allen asked me if I wanted him to take care of the JFK situation, I knew he could do it. I'm not sure I understood exactly what he had in mind, but I said: 'Yes, by all means, take care of it. I'll make sure it's worth your while.' And that's all it took—at least from my end."

"So Dulles masterminded the assassination plot. Then Helms and Angleton made all the arrangements," Black Kissinger informs me, "with Bill Harvey, Howard Hunt, and Dave Morales from ZR/RIFLE controlling the scene on the day of. Hoover also had to be brought in early, of course. And LBJ."

"And Johnny Roselli," Black David Rockefeller adds. "Bill Harvey insisted that it couldn't be done without help from Roselli—to liaise with organized crime. Just like they needed Hoover's help from the FBI to facilitate the cover-up."

"Weren't you guys worried about getting caught, having so many people involved? I mean, someone could've talked."

“What you don’t seem to understand,” Black Kissinger harrumphs, “is that when we run our operations from down here, we don’t need to worry about getting caught. We all share the same agenda—to harvest Loosh.”

“So you met Allen Dulles down here. *Black* Allen Dulles.”

“Of course!” Black David Rockefeller says. “But we also met up above. As above, so below.”

“*Albedo... Nigredo...*” I say, repeating the words I heard spouted by Jeb Beezos and everyone else in the Illuminati corporate boardroom.

“*Now* you’re getting it!” Black David Rockefeller says encouragingly.

“So who killed Kennedy?” I ask him. “It wasn’t Lee Harvey Oswald. I know that much, at least.”

“Of course it wasn’t Oswald,” says Black Kissinger, “but he was in it up to his eyeballs. Oswald was set up by his own agency to take the fall. He was a deep-cover CIA asset with crypto security clearance prior to the assassination. He had full knowledge of the U-2 spy plane program. In fact, that’s why they sent him to Russia. He helped the Soviets shoot down Gary Powers’ U-2 in 1960 because the CIA wanted to keep the Cold War running hot. Angleton’s Counter-Intelligence division opened a 201 file on him that same year—1960. During the summer of 1963, Guy Banister was Oswald’s handler, paying him \$200 a month to distribute Fair Play for Cuba Committee flyers. Oswald was under the impression that he was working as a CIA penetrator to get closer to pro-Castro forces, but that poor sap’s fate was already sealed by then. Angleton had decided he was expendable.”

“So Oswald was a patsy, just like he said.”

“Yes, but what he didn’t get around to mentioning was that his CIA contacts had led him to believe that a *staged, non-lethal* assassination attempt would be happening in Dallas. A false flag event. It was supposed to implicate Castro, with the intended result being a U.S. invasion of Cuba. They sold it to him as

Operation Northwoods Lite. Oswald planted the evidence on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository with that in mind. But he never fired a single round.”

“So who did then?”

“It was a turkey shoot,” Black David Rockefeller says. “George Bush and Félix Rodríguez managed the team of Operation 40 assassins inside the Dal-Tex building, shooting from the wide open second floor window of Dallas Uranium and Oil. They were using silencers, which caused them to hit Connally by mistake. Typical of Bush. Every op he gets involved in always seems to go a little wonky.

“At the same time, LBJ’s personal hit man, Mac Wallace, was up on the sixth floor of the building across the street, where Oswald was supposed to be. Wallace fired off two or three quick shots: one missed, one struck Kennedy in the back—I’m not sure if there was a third. They had him do that just to make sure LBJ had some skin in the game—so he could be controlled later if he decided to renege on his end of the deal, like Kennedy did.”

“Democrats can’t always be trusted,” says Black Kissinger.

“And where was Oswald while all this was going on?”

“Oswald was having lunch on the second floor. Then, after the shooting was over, he walked out of the building drinking a Coke, like a putz. He was supposed to be killed, then and there, but somehow he slipped away.”

“The shots that killed JFK came from the front,” Black David Rockefeller tells me. “The first one was fired from a rifle behind the fence on the grassy knoll. It hit Kennedy in the throat. A man in a police uniform did it. Witnesses saw him pass his rifle to another man, who broke it down and put it into a bag. I can’t recall the shooter’s name. Can you, Henry?”

“That was the Corsican—a contract killer for the Marseilles mob. He went by the codename QJ/WIN. I believe his real name began with an S... something like Santelli, or Sarti, or Souètre. The CIA liked using Corsicans because they never talked and they were harder to trace back to the Agency than

Mafia hit men, or one of their own. Right after the shooting, Bernard Barker kept everyone away from the fence by posing as a Secret Service agent with fake credentials.”

“So was that it, or were there more shooters?”

“I’m sure there were a few others, although I honestly can’t recall their names now,” Black David Rockefeller says with a sigh. “We made sure to kill them all off before they could testify. And that was a long, long time ago.”

“Do you know if a guy named Fred Crisman had anything to do with it?” I ask, recalling Crash’s convoluted tale about Michael Riconosciuto’s “uncle” and his connections to the JFK assassination and UFOs over Maury Island.

“*Crisman*... that name doesn’t ring any bells. Henry?”

“He was supposed to be one of the ‘three tramps’...” I say, hoping to jog their memories.

“I could be mistaken,” Black Kissinger says, “but I believe Crisman was working with Sturgis and Hunt that day. They were handing out fake Secret Service IDs and seeing to other details. Crisman wasn’t among the shooters... *although wait*... now that I think about it, the sewer pipe from the storm drain led back to the train yard where the ‘three tramps’ were arrested. Crisman could have been the sniper in the storm drain.”

“I thought that was Johnny Roselli,” Black David Rockefeller counters. “His instructions were to shoot only if everyone else missed the head shot.”

“Roselli was far too dapper to get his hands that dirty,” says Black Kissinger. “But it really doesn’t matter who pulled the trigger. The CIA, FBI, organized crime, rich Texas oilmen, exiled Cubans, even the Vice-President... they were all complicit—because the orders came from down here.”

“Still, it’d be interesting to know exactly who did it,” I say.

“My money’s on Roselli,” says Black David Rockefeller.

“You could be right,” Black Kissinger admits. “Roselli was primarily a negotiator, but Bill Harvey loved working with him

and knew he could count on him. The CIA needed someone they could trust to finish the job if everyone else screwed up. So they placed their last-ditch assassin as close to the kill zone as possible. It might have been Roselli, because he was so reliable. It might have been Crisman... or Morales, or Sturgis, or some other foot soldier we've completely forgotten. But I know this: when that final shot blew Kennedy's brains all over the back of his limousine, it came straight from the sewer."

"Where Roselli belonged," Black David Rockefeller adds with a disdainful frown. "He cheated at cards."

"It's interesting to see where your sense of morality kicks in," I say, "but I only asked about Crisman because he leads to my next topic. Which is: What's the truth about aliens and UFOs?"

"Oh... well... that *is* the big question, isn't it?" Black David Rockefeller says as his frown flips into a sly grin.

"When you say 'aliens' do you think of them as coming from outer space?" Black Kissinger asks me. "Because they don't. They're right here, underground, where they've always been."

"Does that mean *you guys* are aliens?" I figure I might as well ask. I don't know if they're aliens, Archons, interdimensional shadow beings, or just skin-inverted psychopaths, but there's definitely something a little off about them.

"We're just like you," Black David Rockefeller says. "We get bored. We get tired. We get horny. We're human—sometimes *very* human. But everyone here has what you might call 'alien genes' in their DNA"

"And what does that mean, exactly? Did your ancestors get it on with nympho alien babes from Zeta Reticuli?"

"We have a short promotional video that will help answer that question for you," Black Kissinger says, as a huge movie screen lights up on the concrete wall above us. "We show it to all our new Illuminati recruits to give them a sense of our history."

"Is there a TED talk that goes along with this?" I ask.

“Just pay attention,” Black David Rockefeller says, ignoring my snarkiness. “We’ll answer any questions you might have when it’s over.”



“Hello! I’m David Rockefeller and I’d like to welcome *YOU* to the Illuminati!”

Up on the screen, the Caucasian version of David Rockefeller sits at an executive desk with his shaky, age-spotted hands neatly folded in front of him. He has the red-rimmed, lashless eyelids of a reptile, but otherwise he looks like he could be anyone’s sweet old doddering grandpa. Some jazzy, up-tempo trumpet music is playing in the background. It takes me half a second to recognize it as “A Taste of Honey” by Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass.

“I’d like to personally congratulate each and every one of you for having made it this far,” David Rockefeller says, as chipper as any local TV news weatherman. “I know it hasn’t been easy. Some of you have sacrificed loved ones. Others have substantially contributed to the ruination of the Earth. A few among you have even drunk the blood of your own children. But all those hard choices are about to pay off. You’re on the verge of becoming a member in the world’s most elite secret society—the *Illuminati*! And let me remind you, the benefits that go along with being an Illuminati member are simply fantastic!”

A blizzard of hundred dollar bills drifts down from the ceiling onto Rockefeller’s head and shoulders, putting me in mind of Mister Moose’s gleeful ping-pong ball assaults on poor, perpetually flummoxed Captain Kangaroo. Rockefeller smiles into the camera as if the money isn’t even there. Maybe it isn’t: someone like Pam could have created the cheesy illusion in Adobe After Effects.

“Immediately upon joining us,” Rockefeller says, “you’ll be the recipient of *twenty million dollars*, tax-free, to do with as you

please. Now, that might not seem like much in our era of runaway inflation, but believe me, it's just a start."

The movie screen switches to a montage of celebrities clutching Oscars and MTV Music Video Awards. Then it flashes through a series of paparazzi portraits of highly recognizable business titans, famous models, and supple sports figures of both genders.

Rockefeller continues his enthused patrician narration: "Fame, fortune, the love of delightful sex partners... it's all yours for the taking, once you've signed the Illuminati blood oath."

Next, the screen displays a team of friendly-looking doctors in white lab coats and glamour shots of futuristic medical devices—all set to Herb Alpert's irrepressibly mirthful beat.

"And don't forget the added health benefits we offer: access to suppressed medical technologies and otherwise unavailable drugs that will greatly improve your longevity and satisfaction with life. Just look at me: I'm living proof that our in-network Illuminati healthcare system works. Next month, I'll be one hundred years young—and if you play your cards right you, too, can live to be a hundred or more. In fact, you might never have to die at all! How's *that* for an incentive?"

"*But wait!* There's more! No longer will you be troubled by your enemies," Rockefeller narrates as we're shown a montage of men in expensive suits dying in a variety of grimly hilarious ways: a chainsaw juggling accident in Central Park, spontaneous human combustion at a Scores strip club, a Mercedes-Maybach exploding *before* it hits a palm tree at 120 mph, a case of blowfish sashimi poisoning at Nobu, and so on. "You'll have access to the full range of the Illuminati's secret TWEP technologies, which stands for Terminate With Extreme Prejudice. Some of these technologies have been specifically designed to go undetected in postmortem investigations. Remember that quick case of cancer Jack Ruby caught in jail after he shot Lee Harvey Oswald? *That was us!* Imagine how far we've come since then."

A montage of newspapers, magazines, and Fox News broadcasts assault the screen with a variety of hard-to-believe

headlines: *BUSH PREVAILS By Single Vote, Justices End Recount, Blocking Gore After 5-Week Struggle; U.S. Suspects Al Qaeda Got Nerve Agent From Iraqis; Goose Wants To Be A Woman!* Etc.

“And that’s not all!” Rockefeller’s narration continues against the background of Alpert’s ebullient horn arrangements. “You’ll also enjoy all the benefits of our New and Improved Operation Mockingbird—*Mockingbird 2.0*—the Illuminati’s worldwide network of corrupt media ‘presstitutes’ who are always ready to do your bidding. Do you have a particular way of seeing yourself or your accomplishments that you’d like to have the great seething mass of humanity accept as fact? Well, *now you can!* Any dissenting opinions will be ruthlessly quashed by our coordinated public relations campaigns. Think of how much easier it will be to get your way in the world once you have *that* working in your favor.

“All this sounds too good to be true, am I right?” Rockefeller asks his unseen viewers; while up on the screen—like some demented Scientology training video—a typical Illuminati initiate shakes hands with a smiling consultant and then sits down to discuss his prospects. “Well, as always, we’re going to expect a little something in return for our generosity. Not your immortal soul. *Oh no!* Most of you gave that up years ago—for very little in return, I might add. No, all we want is the opportunity to pair you off with your very own Archon doppelgänger.”

In split-screen mode, Black Henry Kissinger appears on the left side of the movie screen, while regular old Henry Kissinger appears in a similar pose on the right. Then Kissinger is replaced by Black George Clooney on the left, and the more familiar bushy-browed Caucasian George Clooney on the right, and so on, through dual portraits of Madonna, Donald Trump, Pope Benedict, Sarah Palin, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeb Beezos, and countless others. Then the screen switches to a live view of the Choronzon Room, panning around the central poker table. All the while, Rockefeller narrates:

“Now, what is an Archon doppelgänger, you might ask? An Archon doppelgänger will be your twin for life. Even though he

or she remains underground while you conduct your business in the world above, you and your inverted Archon twin will be able to read each other's thoughts. *Imagine having a friend like that!* Your Archon twin will be as intimate with you as your own shadow. In fact, if you're at all familiar with the psychological terms used by Dr. Carl Jung, an Archon doppelgänger is quite similar to what Jung referred to as the Shadow—all those repressed, unconscious parts of your personality that you'll need to integrate if you're ever to become a well-rounded human being. So you might think of your initiation into the Illuminati as a crucial step in the process of individuation. Because as Jung wrote in his *Mysterium Coniunctionis*: '*...the king constantly needs the renewal that begins with a descent into his own darkness.*' And down in the realm of the Archons, I assure you, we have enough darkness to go around for everyone."

The movie screen returns to Rockefeller at his hundred-dollar-bill-strewn desk: "At this point, some of you might be asking yourselves: *'Just where do these Archon doppelgängers come from?'*" Well, I'll tell you. It's not a simple story, but it's an honest one, to the best of my knowledge. The Archons have always been here. They're inorganic beings that existed in our solar system long before the formation of the Earth. And they've always been our planet's true rulers."

Up on the screen, a 5,000-year-old clay tablet depicts a friendly meeting between a winged Chaos Monster and Sin—the God of the Moon—also recognized as the father of all other gods. "To the ancient Sumerians, the Archons were known as the *Anunnaki*," Rockefeller narrates as more depictions of Sumerian gods and goddesses cross-fade on the screen. "According to their legends, there were 300 Anunnaki in heaven, and 300 more on Earth. Archons... Anunnaki... call them what you will. Their numbers have only grown over the years, but *how* they rule is much the same now as it was then, at the dawn of civilization. The Archons are shape-shifters. They can assume human form, or rule by telepathy and suggestion. Those of us in the Illuminati just make their jobs easier by acting as human hosts for an indwelling Archon intelligence."

Back to Rockefeller at his money-strewn desk: “Don’t let the thought of sharing your thoughts scare you. You’ll still be you. You’ll still be in charge. By betraying your community and your culture for personal gain, you’ve already demonstrated that you think like the Archons. So having one steering your decisions in life will be painless. There’s no shame involved. And need I remind you? The benefits that go along with this deal are absolutely phenomenal!

“Once you sign in blood on the dotted line, you’ll have an Archon friend for life. This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! You’ll find no better deal anywhere, at any price. So what are you waiting for? Sit down with your sponsors right now and they’ll walk you through the process. If you have any questions at all, they’ll be happy to answer them for you. And good luck! I look forward to day when I’ll be able to shake your hand in person and say: *‘Welcome to the Illuminati!’*”



“So if at first you don’t succeed, you probably just haven’t joined the Illuminati yet, huh?”

“That’s essentially correct,” Black Kissinger confirms for me, “but because it’s so much harder to be a nobody once you’ve had an early taste of success, we always provide our most promising candidates with some beginner’s luck before we try to recruit them. Like we did with you and your sudden spike in book sales.”

“So that was *you guys*? And now you think that just because my credit cards are paid off, I’ll cross over to the Dark Side? Not fucking likely.”

Turning to Black David Rockefeller, I say, “You mentioned that you’re a shape-shifter. I’d like to know what you *really* look like under that fake-Negro skin. My guess is you’re a two-horned, prong-tailed, flaming red devil—like some kind of *Childhood’s End* alien for rich, white, overweening assholes. Am I far off?”

“*This* is what we look like...” Black David Rockefeller says, morphing right in front of me into a freaky-looking, 8-foot tall lizard person with feathered wings. He’s evil-eyed and muscular. His beaky, greenish-black head is elongated at the back like the Egyptian skulls of Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamun—or one of those nasty, acid-blooded space raptors in the *Alien* movies.

Is that what Conye shape-shifted into under the bridge that night we got high together? I wonder.

Black Kissinger gets in on the action, too, morphing into a tall, spindly, pinkish-grey alien with big, black, almond-shaped eyes, no ears, and a tiny, lipless mouth. He looks utterly naked, like a blind and hairless fetus. And he’s dickless—as bald as a Barbie doll down where it counts—whereas that freakazoid Rockefeller lizard is hung with a stiff, scaly lizard dick that’s at least a two feet long (and kind of corkscrewy...).

“Why do you guys look so different?” I ask them, worried that the lizard-dude might try to eat my brains—or jizz on my face.

They both morph back to their black-skinned human forms, much to my relief. “Archons come in two species,” Black David Rockefeller informs me. “The larger Reptilians once walked the Earth when it had a much thicker atmosphere. Back then, higher carbon dioxide levels and higher atmospheric pressure protected our kind from the detrimental radiation of the sun. But as that atmosphere dissipated during the age of the dinosaurs, we eventually had to move underground.”

“Detrimental radiation?” I repeat, recalling Richard Shaver’s tales of the sun-fucked, cave-dwelling “detrimental robots” known to him as the Deros.

“Yes.” Black Kissinger takes over, explaining: “Our skin is much like the skin of amphibians. If we’re exposed to too much sun, we dry out—and that drives us crazy. The Grey Archons like myself have adapted to a life that’s lived almost completely underground. Our less muscular bodies make fewer demands on our food resources—mainly mushrooms and the occasional blindfish caught from underground lakes and streams. Oh, and

Loosh. We consume Loosh in vast quantities. It's our primary fuel source—and our entertainment. We all enjoy the vicarious thrill of experiencing human emotions.”

“Loosh is all well and good,” Black David Rockefeller interrupts, “but we reptilians still have a taste for aboveground meat. That's where wars and human sacrifice rituals come in. The reptilian Archons have always required gamier fare than our grey Archon brethren.”

“Well, that just fucking explains everything, doesn't it?” I say. “No wonder you guys are always pulling the strings for perpetual warfare. You're just hungry, right? Just looking for the next energy banquet full of delicious human blood and suffering. What else have you got down here—a McDonald's that serves hamburgers made from missing kids?”

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated,” Black David Rockefeller says with disdainful pride. “McDonald's was a *human* idea. You treat your cattle far worse than we treat you.”

“We don't raise you for meat,” Black Kissinger elucidates. “We just harvest your Loosh—a process that isn't always fatal, unlike being turned into a hamburger.”

“What about 9/11? That seemed pretty fatal for about 3,000 people. Can you honestly say you didn't have anything to do with that?”

Black Kissinger blinks at me through his thick Poindexter glasses. “Okay, sure... 9/11 was an Illuminati operation—an Archontic Megaritual. There's no use denying it. We look upon it as one of our greatest achievements. But I can understand how it might be seen as cruel and manipulative from your perspective.”

“So how'd that work, exactly? Those planes didn't just bring down the Twin Towers all by themselves. And Building 7? I mean, c'mon... it didn't even get hit.”

“If you really must know, we took a multimodal approach to 9/11,” says Black Kissinger. “That's why so many truth-seekers end up being confused by it. They think it has to be *only* planes that brought down the World Trade Center towers. Or *only*

controlled demolition. Or *only* a directed-energy weapon. But in actual fact, we employed all three of those methods—and more. The events of 9/11 coalesced into a symphony of terror—a perfect storm of Loosh-producing mayhem—and the whole show had more major players than even the JFK assassination.”

“Like who? Name some names.”

“Well, if you want to go back to the very beginning, I suppose I’m to blame,” Black David Rockefeller says with another one of his elegant shrugs. “The original idea to build the World Trade Center came from me. I’m the one who suggested it should be built in Lower Manhattan and financed by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. I knew it couldn’t be done without the Port Authority’s power to issue its own bonds—which could be paid off by raising transportation tolls and fees. The private sector wouldn’t touch the project because it was a sure money-loser. And indeed, the Twin Towers, in particular, lost spectacular sums of money throughout their existence. But my brother, Nelson, was Governor of New York back then, so we were able to ram the World Trade Center plans through. And during their construction in the early seventies, we made sure that the Twin Towers were built to collapse in the way that they did. Explosives were pre-wired and baked right into the reinforced concrete panels in the core walls—along with 400 hundred tons of asbestos for fireproofing and insulation. I’ll wager you didn’t know that.”

“Um, no. That hadn’t even occurred to me,” I admit.

Up on the movie screen, an old photograph from *The New York Times* shows Nelson and David Rockefeller gloating over an architect’s model of the World Trade Center. A bright, bouncy bit of K-pop kicks in on the soundtrack—IU’s hit single, “Twenty-Three.” (Don’t ask me how I know that. I’m not even sure myself. It feels like my brain is downloading information from the future.)

“We knew the towers would have to come down someday,” Black David Rockefeller says, feigning regret as a time-lapse movie appears on the screen, showing the Twin Towers going

up, floor-by-floor, as the weeks tick off in seconds. “The architects claimed they were built to last a century, but that was a lie. Galvanic corrosion started eating away at the cast aluminum façade within a few years. The outer panels were threatening to peel off from the steel support beams and go plummeting into the street like gigantic razor blades. Even worse, from a financial perspective, the buildings needed to be decontaminated for asbestos. Even as far back as 1989, the costs had been estimated at nearly a billion dollars, so the work had been postponed indefinitely. By then, the Twin Towers were already obsolete—*white elephants*—but no one wanted to take on the job of dismantling them. A complete takedown and rebuild, in conformance with New York City codes for asbestos removal, could have easily cost as much as *ten billion* dollars.”

Up on the screen, the high-wire artist, Philippe Petit, walks in herky-jerky quintuple time back and forth across a tightrope strung between the North and South Towers.

“So what did they do instead?” It’s a rhetorical question. Black David Rockefeller tells me what they did: “On July 24th, 2001, the Port Authority sold a 99-year-lease on the World Trade Center to our esteemed colleague, Larry Silverstein. Larry’s a New York City real estate speculator and an intimate friend of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. They chat on the phone like sisters every Sunday. As it so happens, Netanyahu’s Archon doppelgänger is seated at our table over there. Would you like to go over and say hello?”

“Um, no thanks. I’ve never really liked the guy. He seems way too gung-ho about slaughtering Palestinians. Can I say that? Or is that considered anti-Semitic?”

“Not down here,” Black Kissinger says. “Up above? Maybe. Zionist leaders can be the world’s worst shits, but they’ll play the anti-Semitism card whenever they think it will help their cause.” He looks up at the movie screen and provides some impromptu narration as scenes from 9/11 begin to play out:

“Troubled buildings, condemned for asbestos, losing money every year... you have to wonder why anyone would assume

financial responsibility for them. Larry shares my Jewish ancestry. He doesn't like losing money. So what did he do? To secure the World Trade Center lease, he only had to put up fourteen million dollars of his own money. *A pittance*, as these things go. Larry doubled-down on his insurance policies for a total coverage amount of \$3.5 billion, and then he renegotiated the terms to make sure they covered acts of terrorism. And *then* he helped us orchestrate the Great American False Flag Psy-Opera that took place seven weeks later.

"You have to admire his audacity. Larry was even seen on national television on the afternoon of 9/11 telling firefighters to 'pull' Building 7—the building he owned outright—after a flaw in the wiring of the first round of demolition charges had prevented Building 7 from being taken down earlier that morning. His plan had been to demolish 7 World Trade Center while dust clouds from the Twin Towers collapse rendered it invisible. But that plan failed, so Larry had to send in a Mossad team of demolition experts to rig the twelve inner steel support columns with a new round of nano-thermite cutting charges—which explains why nano-thermite was found in the dust at the World Trade Center later."

As Building 7 collapses on-screen, Black Kissinger says: "At 5:20 in the afternoon, the new charges were set off and Building 7 imploded, falling straight down into a compact pile of rubble at free fall speed—6.5 seconds. All because of a few small office fires—or so it was claimed in the FEMA and NIST cover-up reports. Teams of special agents were sent out to Fresh Kills Landfill to sift through every bit of debris from Building 7—piece by piece, on conveyor belts—to make sure that no electronic devices (or evidence of controlled demolition) would be found in the rubble later.

"Even after all that, Larry still had the chutzpah to sue for double compensation, claiming the two planes that hit the Twin Towers constituted two separate and unrelated terrorist attacks. And that scheming bastard *won*, receiving insurance payouts of over \$4.5 billion against his initial investment of \$14 million. Plus, he got another \$865 million for the collapse of Building 7.

Of course, all that money didn't go straight into Larry's pocket. But he still made out like a bandit—thanks to the Illuminati.”

“J.P. Morgan did something similar with the RMS *Titanic*,” Black David Rockefeller says, almost musing to himself. “That was another insurance scam for the ages.”

“Wait... the *Titanic* was sunk to collect on the insurance?”

“It wasn't the *Titanic*. It was the RMS *Olympic* ‘disguised’ as the *Titanic*,” Black David Rockefeller explains. “You see, Morgan's British-based shipping company, the White Star Line, had built the *Olympic* a full year ahead of her sister ship, the *Titanic*. The two ships were identical in almost every way. But in the fall of 1911, on her fifth voyage, the *Olympic* collided at sea with a British warship named the HMS *Hawke*. The Royal Navy blamed the *Olympic* for the incident and they prevailed in court. For J.P. Morgan, it was a financial disaster. The White Star Line was facing bankruptcy. It was saddled with huge legal bills, the cost of repairing both the *Olympic* and the *Hawke*, and revenue was being lost while the *Olympic* was out of service. Morgan had been confidentially informed that the *Olympic*'s hull had been damaged beyond economic repair and she would never again be sea-worthy—or insurable. So he decided to do a slapdash, cosmetic patch and then switch the identities of the *Olympic* and the *Titanic* while they were dry-docked together in Belfast.”

“And then he told the fake-*Titanic*'s captain to go ram it into an iceberg?”

“On her maiden voyage,” Black David Rockefeller says with a smirk and a nod. “Morgan's insurance policy with Lloyd's of London ‘fortuitously’ covered icebergs. The *Titanic* was insured for one million pounds. That would be the equivalent of about \$130 million in today's dollars. Lloyd's paid that sum within thirty days and Morgan's financial pain was ameliorated.”

Again, Black Kissinger fills in the details: “The ship's sinking had other benefits for Morgan, as well. Three of the most prominent opponents to his Jekyll Island plan to create the Federal Reserve went down with the ship, after Morgan had coaxed them onto it: Benjamin Guggenheim, Isidor Straus, and

John Jacob Astor IV. But over fifty other first-class passengers canceled their reservations just before the ship left port—all of them friends and colleagues of J.P. Morgan. Morgan himself was supposed to be on the *Titanic*, but he also canceled at the last minute and even saw to it that two priceless bronzes he'd planned to ship across the Atlantic were taken offboard."

"What a bastard," I say. "But I still think 9/11 was worse."

"It's not a competition to see who can profit the most from their black deeds," Black Kissinger says, "although I know it must appear that way at times."

"You're not kidding," I say. "So how did you guys take down the Twin Towers? I'm still curious."

"Have you ever heard of DEW? D-E-W. It's an acronym for Directed Energy Weapons."

"Is that something Nikola Tesla came up with?"

"No. It's Archon technology. We invented it down here."

Kissinger's an asshole, Gülru scoffs from inside my head. She's been quiet for so long that I'd almost forgotten she's seeing and hearing the same things I do. *He's lying*, she says. *The Archons never invented anything. The only thing they're good at is virtual reality.*

I wish I could talk back to her, but I can't, so I just roll with Black Kissinger's story and ask:

"How does a Directed Energy Weapon work? What're we talking about here: particle-beams, invisible lasers, or what?"

"I'm not an physicist," Black Kissinger tells me, "so I can't give you a detailed synopsis of how it all works. What I do know is that the weapon we used on 9/11 relies on a complex interaction between electrostatic, magnetic, and radio frequency fields. It also made use of the field effects from Hurricane Erin, which was traveling close to New York City that day."

"Wait—*what?* There was a hurricane close to New York on 9/11? I thought the skies were clear and blue."

"They were, but Erin was only 500 miles off the coast and heading straight toward New York City when the Twin Towers

were attacked. It was a category 3 hurricane comparable in size to Hurricane Katrina and similar in strength to Hurricane Sandy.”

“I had no fucking clue.”

“Most people didn’t,” Black David Rockefeller says. “We imposed a Mockingbird 2.0 corporate media blackout on Erin, so it was barely reported.”

“And why’d you do that?”

“Because, as Henry said, we intended to use Hurricane Erin’s field effects to ‘dustify’ the World Trade Center towers. You see, super cell storms give off high voltage electrical discharges similar to that of a Tesla coil, but on an absolutely massive scale. We were able to collect and redirect all that energy into the tops of the Twin Towers by turning them into twin lightning rods, so to speak.”

“How? By using planes? Satellites?”

“No. Again, like Henry said, we did it with a complex interaction of frequency fields. You’ve heard of HAARP, right? The High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program up in Alaska that the U.S. military supposedly uses to manipulate the weather?”

“Sure, I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never been able to figure out what they’re doing with it. Was it used for this?”

“No. The towers weren’t taken down by HAARP, although the Directed Energy Weapon we *did* use is capable of the same things that conspiracy theorists have attributed to HAARP. For instance, much of the steel and concrete in the towers was turned into very fine dust, due to molecular dissociation caused by the field effects. You’ll never see *that* in a conventional controlled demolition situation, although we did set off a few barometric bombs before the main event—just to soften things up and keep everyone on their toes. We’ve always found that a multimodal plan of attack works best.”

“So why didn’t you guys use your fancy Directed Energy Weapon to take down Building 7?”

“Quite simply, we ran out of juice,” Black Kissinger says. “Some demolition charges went off in Building 7 at 9:15 that morning—that’s what caused the office fires—but Hurricane Erin was pretty well spent by the time we were finished with Towers 1 and 2.”

“So you guys didn’t have enough spunk leftover for a third money shot, huh?”

“That’s putting it rather crudely,” Black David Rockefeller chides me, “but the truth is, we were running low on field effect energy, so Larry had to improvise.”

“Why was he so hot to have Building 7 come down, anyway? Couldn’t he’ve just left it standing?”

“It had to come down because it was the control center for our entire operation,” Black Kissinger says. “Not only was it Mayor Giuliani’s Emergency Command Center—it also housed offices for Salomon Brothers, the CIA, the Department of Defense, the Secret Service, the IRS, and the Securities and Exchange Commission... all complicit parties, to one degree or another, with good reasons to bury the evidence. For instance, the SEC office held records for the investigation into Enron—one of the biggest financial scandals in history up to that point. Some of our top men had been at Enron. We didn’t want to see them land in jail.”

“Hey, that reminds me...” I say, “what’s the story behind all those put options that were taken out on American Airlines and United right before their planes hit the towers? Was that you guys, too?”

“I can explain that,” Black David Rockefeller volunteers. “The put options against those two airlines were twenty-five times higher than average in the week leading up to 9/11. After the attacks, the shares of American Airlines and United Airlines fell by over forty percent, resulting in gains for the put option holders of several hundred million dollars. On the surface, it looked like the largest insider trading crime ever committed, so the securities commission looked into it. What they found was that a single institutional investor had purchased 95 percent of

the United Airlines puts through the Chicago Board Option Exchange. That institutional investor was Alex Brown & Sons—a subsidiary of Deutsche Bank—whose former Chairman and CEO until 1998 had been Buzzy Krongard. It just so happened that Buzzy had been made the executive director of the CIA in March of 2001. So was it insider trading? You tell me.”

“I think the Magic 8-Ball would say ‘Signs point to yes’ on that one. Here’s a related question: Does the CIA or the NSA monitor banks and financial markets with PROMIS software?” I’m thinking of Michael Riconosciuto and the Octopus again.

“I couldn’t tell you the name of the software they use, but *Yes*—that sort of monitoring is done all the time,” Black David Rockefeller admits. “If the average person knew how rigged the stock market is—and how deeply corrupt the banking system is and always has been—they’d want to keep all their money hidden at home in a safe. One thing I can tell you with absolute certainty is that if all the CIA drug money were to be suddenly pulled from the system, we’d experience a worldwide financial collapse. We’ve grown that dependent on it.”

“So if the CIA was monitoring Al Qaeda with PROMIS-type software, they could’ve known about the 9/11 attacks in advance and—”

“No. You’re not seeing the big picture yet,” Black Kissinger interrupts me. “Osama bin Laden was just a patsy. He was the Lee Harvey Oswald of 9/11.”

“But I thought there were videos where he talked about doing it.” Three such video clips featuring Osama bin Laden appear on the screen as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

“They were fake,” says Black Kissinger. And indeed, the actors playing Osama bin Laden don’t even look the same from clip to clip. “It’s amazing what we got away with. Those bin Laden videos weren’t even that good, compared to the RGB video facial capture and re-enactment software we have now. We can make any person on television say and do whatever we want, in real-time.”

“I suppose that means I shouldn’t trust anything I see on TV.”

“Did you ever? You’re a fool if you did. Television is the greatest distribution platform for mass persuasion ever invented. Why do you think news reporters were caught announcing the collapse of Building 7 *before* it happened? Everything about 9/11 was scripted.”

Up on the screen, BBC World correspondent Jane Standley is seen reporting live from New York on 9/11, telling her viewers that Building 7 has just collapsed, even though it’s still clearly standing in the cityscape behind her. I’ve seen that video clip before. Over twenty minutes would pass before Building 7’s actual collapse. *Oh well*. Even scripted events have their glitches, I suppose.

Black David Rockefeller assumes a professorial mien and says to me: “Studies have shown that if information from an authority figure is received by someone during a period of emotional trauma, that information becomes fused into the memory of the trauma in a way that makes the distinction between facts and interpretation almost impossible. We were aware of that going into 9/11—which is why, within ten minutes of the second plane hitting the Twin Towers, we had CNN announcing that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the attacks. It put public opinion into a trance. Even intelligent people found it difficult to think about 9/11 for themselves because they’d been fed disinformation from the true perpetrators at the peak moment of their rational vulnerability.”

“But why pin it on bin Laden?” I ask. “Was it just because you wanted an endless, unwinnable War on Terror in the Middle East?”

“That’s one reason, of course,” Black Kissinger says. “Endless war translates into an endless source of Loosh. But there’s more to it than that.”

“World economic control—that’s what we’re after,” Black David Rockefeller says with a malicious grin. “Full-spectrum dominance over every human being on the planet. We’ll do it by establishing a worldwide system of government—a New World

Order—with one common currency controlled by the central banks of the world, acting in concert through the Bank for International Settlements in Basle, Switzerland. Someday quite soon, all money will be encoded on RFID chips. And we'll control the chips, of course. Should someone step out of line, their chips will be turned off and they'll find that they're out of a job, their digital bank accounts have been frozen, and no one will lend to them. They won't even be able to get food stamps or social security payments. No dissenter will be able to dissent for long if he or she can't get enough to eat."

"Really? You guys'd do that?" I say, appalled. "That is so fucking evil, it almost sounds like a farce."

"It's not a farce. As I approach my 100th year, I've decided it's time for me to live up to my reputation. For more than a century now, ideological extremists have attacked the Rockefeller family for the inordinate influence we wield over American political and economic institutions. Some even suspect—rightly, I might add—that we're part of a secret cabal working against the best interests of the United States. They characterize my family and me as 'internationalists' conspiring with others around the world to build a more integrated global and political economic structure—one world, if you will. If that's the charge, I stand guilty, and I'm proud of it."

Shaking my head, I say, "You're a sick fuck, Space Raptor Rockefeller. And you, too, Little Black Kissinger."

"You're going to think we're your best friends in the world after you meet Yaldabaoth," Black Kissinger says.

His tone is so neutral that it makes it hard to discern whether he's speaking with sarcastic malice or hinting at a future we'll all three share, brimming with brotherly love.

I suspect it's the former, of course.

A CHAT WITH CLONENHOOF IN CHAPEL PERILOUS

Chapel Perilous has one of those glass Apple Store staircases—only the treads on this one are crystal clear and slippery smooth. It also lacks walls or railings—and it ascends out over an abyss. Black Henry Kissinger leads me to it after he escorts me through the Choronzon Room’s rear exit.

“There’s a red door at the top of the stairs,” he says in his gravelly Teutonic accent. “That’s where you’ll find Yaldabaoth. Good luck.” He pats me on the shoulder before he turns and walks away.

Time for him to get back to enslaving mankind, I guess.

So I’m off to meet the boss of bosses, I think to myself. Yaldabaoth, Lord of the Archons. Demiurge to the rich and famous.

Well, maybe I’ll meet him, or maybe I won’t. About midway up the crystal staircase, I suffer a near-paralyzing attack of vertigo. I can barely make out the steps in front of me, lit from below by a fiery spiderweb of what I can only assume are rivers of lava coursing through a black, rocky landscape far below. The staircase feels wobbly and unstable. It’s like climbing high on an aluminum extension ladder when that ladder has been extended beyond its limits. I feel like I could slip off at any moment and go tumbling into the pits of hell.

I sit down and contemplate scooching the rest of the way up on my butt, moving by feel, one riser at a time.

Derek? Don't talk. Just listen, Gülru says from within my head. I don't think I've ever been more grateful to hear another human voice. You need to be careful around Yaldabaoth, she says. He's a trickster, a master of the limited hangout. Everything he says will contain some element of truth, but that's only to distract you from the things he doesn't want you to know. Don't fall for it, okay?

"Okay," I say, under my breath.

I won't be able to talk to you while you're in the steeple. Yaldabaoth has some kind of a Faraday cage around it. He likes his privacy—even though he wants to eliminate privacy for everyone else.

"I can't move right now..." I whisper.

I know you're scared, says Gülru. Anyone would be... even dictators and kings have been known to lose their shit around Yaldabaoth. But I've been around him a lot, and I can tell you: he's not that bad. He'll even listen to reason.

Just don't go in there thinking you can fool him. He knows everything you think and do. But what you need to remember is that you have something that Yaldabaoth doesn't. You have a Divine Spark. Part of your consciousness is immortal. Indestructible. It never dies.

Sure, your body will die—that could happen at any time. And your ego—whatever you think of as Derek Swannson—that will die, too. But the part of you that has observed the story of your life, and your brother's life, and the world around you... the part of you that has lived many lives—not all of them in this universe... that part will survive. Yaldabaoth can't touch it. But if you're not careful—if you believe his lies—he can keep you trapped here. This is his world, not yours. You belong in a world of light and love. Remember that. It's important.

"Okay," I say.

From now on, it might be helpful to think of yourself as a character in a book, or an avatar in some advanced civilization's video game—because none of this is real in the way that you understand real. Your optic nerves can't tell you the full truth down here. Always keep in mind that the only thing the Archons are really good at is virtual reality.

I've heard Elon Musk riff on that idea before—that we're all computer-generated avatars living inside some super-advanced civilization's version of SimCity. Elon explains it this way: Forty years ago we had Pong. Two rectangles for paddles and a tiny pixel square bouncing around between them like a lo-def tennis ball. Now we have photorealistic 3-D simulations with millions of people jacked in and interacting in real-time. And the games keep getting better every year. If you assume a relatively constant rate of improvement—and add in augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial super-intelligence advancing ever closer to self-awareness and independent silicon consciousness—then at a certain point the games will become indistinguishable from reality. With that trajectory in mind, imagine what computer simulations will be like in 5,000 years. How would we even know if we were in one? Elon did the math and said there's only a one in billions chance that we're in base reality now. It's way more likely that we're high-fidelity ancestor simulations with simulated sentience—and simulated *skandhas*—which would make us the digital equivalent of cognitive zombies. Our creators, in theory, would be posthuman descendants of an original biological race.

So I get what Gülrü's saying there. But then I also remember something else that Elon said: *"With artificial intelligence we're summoning the demon. You know those stories where there's the guy with the pentagram and the holy water and he's like—Yeah, he's sure he can control the demon? Doesn't work out."*

Anyone familiar with the observer effect in quantum mechanics knows that our universe behaves like a simulation: subatomic particles have no definite state until they're observed. In other words, perception affects reality. Our indeterminate universe gets "real" and stays "real" as long as we pay attention to it, much like the game engine for *Grand Theft Auto* only generates the area that players need to see while they're playing.

Maybe the self-aware AI robot running our planetary video game virtual reality is secretly named Yaldabaoth.

"Oh fuck," I breathe. I get to my feet and start trudging up the stairs two at a time. I'm determined to get this over with

now. If I'm just an avatar in some silicon demigod's cosmic video game, this sweaty little life of mine has no purpose. Nothing I ever do will have any consequence. Not really. Not from the perspective of eternity.

I just wish I'd had the foresight to pick up a Masters in Computational Demonology from MIT. Then I might have had a shot at hacking my own pseudo-reality.

Slow down, Gülru advises me. Once you go through the red door, it might be hard for you to focus on anything other than Yaldabaoth. Don't let the six arms scare you. He's never hit anyone that I know of. Just remember to breathe and take a look around.

Six arms? I think to myself. Seriously? Is Yaldabaoth a giant cockroach, like that guy in the Kafka story? My hyperactive mind spits out one of my favorite Kafka quotes:

"Writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself."

Meanwhile, Gülru is still talking: *Somewhere inside the steeple, you'll see a doorway covered in weird blue flames, she tells me. Once you find it, you won't want to go through it. Yaldabaoth has put a geas on it that makes people imagine their worst fears waiting for them on the other side. But that's where you'll have to go. There's no other way out. If you pass through the flames, you'll find me waiting for you—and I'll do my best to get you back aboveground.*

I sigh, as if to say, *That'd be great.* For some crazy reason, I flash on sharing a Maple Coconut Bacon doughnut with Pam on the back deck of Rosa's Shark Shack while Barb the Waitress stops by for a chat before handing us the check.

Sunlight, someone to love, and the salty good cheer of a waitress serving brunch... the Earth has some pretty good things going for it when the Archons aren't around to screw things up.

Just as I'm having that thought, I feel an invisible presence stop me on the stairs and wrap me in a warm, enveloping hug. I know it's just my exoskeleton suit contracting in response to Gülru's remote manipulations, but still, it feels good. And again—even though I don't understand how she does it—I feel Gülru's lips pressing against mine, bestowing a tender kiss.

I know you still want to find Pam, she says. And I'll help you do that. But if you and Pam don't work out, for whatever reason, I hope you'll come back to Seattle to visit me. I really think I could love you, Derek. We'd make a great team.

"Thanks," I whisper. There's much more I could say, but I'm afraid to say it. My feelings about Gülru are so conflicted that I'm sure she'd sense my ambivalence within a few sentences. Now's not the time to risk putting her into a sulk. She's my only connection to humanity down here. I want to stay on her good side.

Just think about it. You don't need to make any promises.

"Okay," I say, while thinking to myself: *What if she's Black Gülru and she's just leading me into one trap after another?*

Finally, the stairs reach their terminus on a black-and-white tiled platform. The platform seems to be levitating in murky darkness, with no discernable supporting walls—and no ceiling from which to suspend it on cables. A ruby red door stands in the center of the platform radiating a rosy, spectral glow.

I'm reminded of Jeb Beezos' *dohyō* and how I got my ass handed to me the last time I stepped onto black-and-white Moses Pavement. I gingerly test the platform with my foot, unsure if it will support my weight. It feels steady enough, so I quickly walk across it to the ruby red door. Where else can I go? According to Gülru, there's no other way out.

Remember... she says as I reach for the doorknob, *don't believe everything you hear. And don't be scared. Yaldabaoth eats fear for breakfast. Fear is like a tasty Maple Coconut Bacon doughnut to him.*

How'd she know about the doughnut? I wonder.

The door opens before I even touch it. "*Derek! Come on in!*" a big, hearty voice booms out at me. I get a pungent whiff of joss sticks and patchouli. I go inside.

I find myself in another room. It's a room that shouldn't even be there, based on what I saw from outside the door, but it stubbornly exists nonetheless. The interior looks like a sultan's tent. Ruby red silk is draped all around from a high central point in the ceiling. I see elaborately carved wooden benches, Moroccan

lanterns, antique Persian rugs gridded across the floor, and a silver hookah on a sea green coffee table. One of the hookah's tubes snakes into the beak-like maw of an angry red octopusman seated on a striped silk couch. It's like seeing Cthulhu shrunk down to the size of a professional basketball player—Wilt Chamberlain with dragon wings and a face full of tentacles.

Anything can happen in virtual reality, I remind myself.

"You can take off your VR goggles," the octopusman tells me, exhaling a greenish, skunky cloud of hookah smoke. "You won't need them in here."

I raise the VR goggles so they rest on top of my forehead. The room stays the same, but the octopusman resolves into Aizen Myō'ō—the Wisdom King of Passion—a living embodiment of the tattoo I saw on Gülru's chest: six arms, bloody fangs, bulging white eyes, scarlet skin, and the face of a spectral blue lion glaring out at me from an electrified samurai hairdo.

It all seems a little over-the-top.

"I'm glad to see you're just a regular guy," I say, offering to shake one of his six hands. "Should I call you Clonenhoof or Yaldabaoth?"

"Yaldabaoth will do, if you work on your pronunciation. Or how about Lloyd? Actually, I'd prefer Lloyd, if you don't mind."

Yaldabaoth shape-shifts into Lloyd Marrsden—the morbidly obese insurance broker and black-ops bagman for the medico-military-intelligence complex who, as I've already mentioned, was the uncle of my brother's old friend and nemesis, James Marrsden (the *New York Times* best-selling author of *A Sea Monster Spurts in San Simeon* and other immortal tomes). I met Lloyd only once, when I was eleven years old, but Yaldabaoth appears exactly as I remember him. It's comforting, in a way, to see that fat old bastard again. I'd much rather be talking to him than a stoned octopusman, or some six-armed, horned-up Buddhist love god.

"So what'd you do with my girlfriend, Lloyd?" I ask, getting right to the point.

“Patience...” Lloyd/Yaldabaoth/Clonenhoof says with a smile and a twinkle in his beady eyes. “We’ll get to that. Don’t worry... she’s alive and well.”

“Why’d you kidnap her?”

“We needed to get your attention. Involving Pam was just the most expedient way to go about it.”

“Okay, so you’ve got my attention. What do you want?”

“Your lack of civility is unbecoming, Derek. You’ve been caught mooning the giant. I understand you’re writing a satire about our mutual friend, Jeb Beezos, is that right?”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call him *a friend* after what he did to me in his *dohyō*,” I say.

“Really? What did you expect? Taking on Jeb Beezos with a book is like arming yourself with a squirt gun for an underwater showdown with a great white shark.”

“Thanks for that demeaning analogy,” I say, “but so what? Why should you even care, Lloyd?” I’m already thinking of him as Lloyd, instead of holding onto the fact that he’s a demonic, shape-shifting Demiurge.

Lloyd waves his flabby white hands in frustration and says, “Don’t you understand? He’ll crush you. You’ll be buried under an avalanche of shit: endless legal troubles, lack of money, no chance of getting work. Little by little, Jeb Beezos will strip you of absolutely everything you hold dear in this world.”

“Which would only prove my point: He’s a tech world totalitarian who needs to be satirized and reined in.”

“Your naiveté astonishes me. You can’t change the world. You have to accept things for what they are and learn to deal with them. Don’t you have any instincts for self-preservation?”

“I’m already standing here, talking to you, so it seems my options for self-preservation are already pretty limited.”

“I was referring to your prior situation.”

“You mean when I was just hanging out in Morro Bay, minding my own business?” I take a seat on the opposite end of the striped couch Lloyd is sitting on. “Back then, as I recall, you were already threatening to gang-rape my girlfriend and make a trophy rack from her boobs. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“I knew what she’d be getting up to with her ‘Galactic Loosh Farming’ video. I could see it coming. A little harmless trolling on the Internet never hurt anyone.”

“I’d disagree, but I’m sure there’s no use arguing with you.”

Lloyd frowns as another thought occurs to him. “By the way, you won that particular round when you posted your girl’s video on UTube, despite her absence. That did us some real harm.”

“If you’d offered me Pam in return for the video, I would’ve made the trade. Your hostage negotiation skills kind of suck.”

“I’m here to rectify that.”

“So what do you want?”

“I want you to stop writing that book—*The Book of Beezos*, as you call it.”

“That’s it? Quit writing and I’ll get Pam back? And you’ll leave us alone?”

“If that’s all you want.”

“It’s enough. What’s the catch?”

“If there’s a catch... and I’m not saying there is... it might be something you don’t even care about.”

“Why don’t you let me make that judgment call... are we talking about forking over my eternal soul here, or what?”

“It has nothing to do with your eternal soul, or spiritual life everlasting, or whatever you want to call it. You can keep that. I could care less. Is that good enough?”

“Maybe. So let’s say I stop writing *The Book of Beezos* and I start writing some other book that has nothing to do with Glamazon or Jeb Beezos. Will your Archons still leave us alone?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you choose to write about. See, it’s not just Jeb Beezos we’re concerned with here... it’s our whole operation. We don’t want you exposing it to the public.”

“Archons, Loosh, the Illuminati—all that?”

“All that.” Lloyd nods his fat head.

“What’s the big deal? It’s not like anyone actually *believes* in Archons. You guys have done a great job of covering your asses. And the Illuminati?” I make a schizoid lip-farting sound. “Only crazy people take that shit seriously.”

“That’s becoming less and less true as our plans are enacted.”

“So you’re saying my books can actually make a difference?”

“A tiny difference. Hardly worth bothering over. But you have no right to interfere with our way of life.”

“*Your way of life?* You’re a bunch of mind-fucking vampires! You prey on *our* lives and cause us suffering—you use us like slaves and livestock—and we’re supposed to be okay with that?”

“When it comes to humans, what you don’t know can’t hurt us. We’d like to keep things that way.”

“So, apparently, I know enough now to be dangerous. Why don’t you just kill me? Why risk having me around, if you don’t like what I write?”

“If only it were that simple,” Lloyd sighs. “You’re a novelist, not a President. Killing you won’t eliminate your books. If anything, your death would make them more popular. So I’m going to ask you again, *nicely*, not to write about certain topics. Why not just write murder mysteries instead? Everyone loves a good murder mystery.”

“Not interested.”

“How about horror novels? Have you noticed what a beloved Old Man of Letters Stephen King has become these days? And let’s not forget my nephew... James has been richly rewarded for his chipper books on the supernatural.”

“He’s not your nephew, Yaldabaoth. Look, talking to a fake version of Lloyd here just isn’t cutting it for me. Why don’t you show me your original face?”

“My original face?”

“Yeah... the original face of the Demiurge.”

“As you wish.” Lloyd vanishes.

The room suddenly swarms with shadows—shadows that seem alien, intelligent, alive, and vicious. Some of those shadows look like flying swordfish, others like coiling sea serpents or flapping manta rays. I can’t look at them directly. When I try, they disappear. I can only see them in my peripheral vision.

In a weird sort of way, they seem familiar. But they also scare the living crap out of me.

Be cool... I mentally remind myself. These things eat fear.

Do you see me now? Yaldabaoth asks from inside my skull. I understand then that he’s everywhere. He has a trillion eyes peering out of the darkness.

No place is hidden from his hateful gaze.

“You’re in the shadows,” I say. “You see everything from everywhere, all at once.” My intuition also tells me this: “You’re there when we die. That’s when you feed.”

I feed not just on your death, but on the death of all living things. I suck the life from the sparrow dropping in the winter’s cold. I’m there when one starving jackal tears into another. I swim with hammerhead sharks when they feast on the drowning men from sinking ships.

“Hoovering up Loosh. Gorging on suffering.”

Why should you care if we feed on death and misery? You can’t eat it. Loosh only nourishes us.

“But you’re *causing* death and misery. We wouldn’t have so much of it if you and your whole sick crew of Archons weren’t always fucking us over.”

You’re made of flesh. You would still suffer. You would still die. And by dying, you’re often saved from fates far worse.

Lloyd returns to the couch and the shadows dissipate. Before they go, however, I glimpse a doorway sheathed in blue flames behind the draping red silk wall to my left. The doorway fades with the shadows and then both are gone. *Weird.*

“What you fail to grasp,” says Lloyd, “is that we also *help* humanity. Much of the technology you now take for granted was first introduced to your world from down here.”

“Are we talking about all that high-tech weaponry you gave to the Nazis, or something more recent, like Facebook?”

Both are tools for mass destruction, if you ask me.

“I won’t deny that we collaborated with the Nazis and turned Mark Zuckerberg into a snot-nosed billionaire,” says Lloyd, “but we’ve also made far more beneficial contributions to your world. For instance, that exoskeleton suit you’re wearing... it was developed down here. Someday quite soon, it will be helping the lame to walk and the sexually frustrated to have healthy orgasms with the perennially youthful avatar of Angelina Jolie.”

“I’m sure Brad Pitt will be stoked to hear that.”

“He signed on to perform the same services. Both avatars will be based on the characters they played in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*.”

With a roll of my eyes, I say, “So virtual sex with Brangelina is your idea of a gift to humanity? What else do we get with that? *A Fantastic Voyage* tour of Ke\$ha’s haunted vagina and a six-pack of non-alcoholic beer?”

“Since you asked, we’re also creating a fleet of sexbots to replace Glamazon’s delivery van drivers. Jeb’s drone program has had some trouble with the FAA, so this is Plan B... but the genius of it is that the sexbots will create an entirely new source of revenue.” Lloyd explains: “Imagine sitting at home, feeling lonely and bored. The doorbell rings and there, on your front porch, is a voluptuous delivery sexbot from Glamazon. She hands over your Glamazon OnTime order of 18 Mega Rolls of Charmin Ultra Soft, a case of Robitussin Cough Gels, and a 100-count box of teriyaki Slim Jims. Then, in a sultry robotic whisper, she asks if you’d like anything else. She tells you that fifteen minutes

of robo-fellatio is only fifty dollars—or you can spend the next half hour boffing her in a three-orifice extravaganza for the low, low price of \$150—and you can put it on your credit card.”

“What a bargain...” I say in my best snarky tone (while making a mental note to buy a shitload of Glamazon stock if I ever get back up to the surface).

“Your girlfriend actually helped us solve one of the technical issues we’d been butting up against,” Lloyd says with a grin.

“Pam?” I ask—just to clarify.

“Yes. Pam. We weren’t sure how to keep the sexbots sanitary. If they became vectors for spreading sexually transmitted disease, it would be Game Over. But Pam solved that problem for us when we heard her joking to Catherine Austin Fitts about ‘black project sexbots with disposable orifice linings.’ *Low-cost disposable orifice linings!* Of course!”

“That seems pretty basic,” I say. “You guys couldn’t figure that out your own?”

“Let’s just say that we don’t specialize in creative solutions to mundane human problems down here. But if you want an early peek at fusion reactors, anti-gravity engines, or time control technologies, then you’ve come to the right place.”

“See, that’s the kind of stuff that would help us out more than a fleet of cheap sexbots—but, for some reason, you’re not sharing.”

Lloyd corrects me. “Oh, we share it. Throughout human history, we’ve always coaxed you along, doling out scientific insights as you become ready for them. Think about it... scientists have always been considered servants of Satan. As you should know, the Hebrew word ‘satan’ simply means ‘adversary’—it’s a shorthand way of referring to yours truly. But I think the underworld deserves more credit. Every scientific discovery of material benefit since the Middle Ages has been secured through our help. I’m not just talking about Galileo and Giordano Bruno—scientists tried for heresy by the Inquisition—I’m talking about *all* major discoveries, including those patented by

the likes of Standard Oil, GE, IBM, IG Farben, DuPont, Dow Chemical, Monsanto, Intel, and Microsoft.”

“You’re right...” I marvel, “all those companies seem kind of satanic, now that I think about it.”

I do a quick mental scan down the list of Lloyd’s corporate collaborators, linking them to deeds that might be indicative of his satanic influence: Standard Oil and its spin-offs probably did more to cause global warming than any other single corporation. General Electric designed the nuclear reactors that failed at Fukushima, poisoning the Pacific with radiation. IBM and IG Farben helped out the Nazis with the Holocaust. DuPont, Dow Chemical, and Monsanto flooded the world with toxins that have been screwing with our health in all kinds of crazy ways. And as for Intel and Microsoft... well, I’m sure they’ll both have blood on their hands from the coming Sexbot Apocalypse.

“Everyone has a few sins on their balance sheets,” Lloyd says with a shrug, “but you can’t deny that those companies have also made substantial contributions to the betterment of mankind.”

“How could we possibly get along without rising sea levels, irradiated tuna fish, vengeful Zionists, unlabeled GMOs, and Windows 8... is that what you’re saying?”

“You know what I’m saying. No corporate entity is perfect, but on the whole, they’ve improved human standards of living. Now, what are your thoughts on fusion reactors? Because that’s a new technology you’ll be seeing very soon.”

“I don’t know much about fusion,” I admit. “Is that what you guys use for power down here?”

“We do,” Lloyd confirms. “Obviously, you don’t want to be burning gasoline or coal in an enclosed system of tunnels and caverns like we have here. You need a clean energy source. Fusion reactors require no fossil fuels and their only by-product is harmless helium.”

“No radiation?”

“Only a little. The material that encases the fusion reactors becomes radioactive over time, but it’s the sort of radioactivity

that dies out much faster than the by-products from conventional nuclear reactors.”

“Sounds good then,” I say. “When do we get it?”

“Jeb Bezos and Paul Allen both have prototype programs underway now. I think we’ll be giving this one to Paul’s company, Tri Alpha, because Jeb’s already getting the exoskeleton suit with all the VR goodies.”

“You make it sound like you’re some kind of Santa Claus for the Billionaire Boy’s Club,” I observe.

“Not really,” says Lloyd, although he seems pleased with the analogy. “Here’s how the system works: We instruct our Illuminati billionaires to privately fund some scrappy mad scientist projects in the surface world: cold fusion, self-driving cars, time machines—*whatever*. Little by little, they leak out news that they’re onto something, which allows our Archon-controlled media companies to lay the groundwork for a major paradigm shift. Then, when everyone’s ready—*voila!* They announce a breakthrough. Only it’s not a breakthrough. Not really. It’s technology we’ve been using down here for thousands of years.”

Something about that story sounds sketchy to me. I say, “But by doing it that way—instead of just giving it to the world for free—people like Paul Allen can monopolize the technology and profit from it.”

“Of course!” Lloyd says, looking at me like I’m an idiot. “It’s *our* technology. We expect to maintain control of it. Besides, think of the consequences. If we just gave fusion away, it would be the next best thing to free energy. It puts out approximately ten times the amount of energy that’s required to run it. The entire world would be transformed. Poverty might even be eradicated. And then what would happen to the world’s aggregate Loosh production? Care to guess?”

“I’m assuming it would go down?”

“Way down. People would live longer and be happier. And we simply can’t have that. It’s unsustainable. The surface world’s ecosystem can’t handle that many happy humans.”

“Is that why Jeb, Elon, and Richard Branson are all building rockets to shoot themselves into space?”

“Again, those are prototype programs. Eventually, after years of news leaks, one of them is going to announce that they’ve perfected anti-gravity technology. And then they’ll go zipping off on a colonizing spree.”

“I was under the impression that the Deep State already has anti-gravity vehicles, but they’ve been keeping them secret.”

“Are you referring to the Roswell Crash, perchance? Reverse-engineered Alien Replica Vehicles... captured grey alien pilots that died at Wright-Patterson after eating too much strawberry ice cream... all that nonsense?”

“Kind of, yeah,” I admit. “Lieutenant Colonel Philip Corso wasn’t one of your guys then, I take it?”

“He was, but he was prone to exaggeration. We provide the technology, willingly. It never has to be reverse-engineered. The Greys use anti-gravity vehicles for their surface world errands, but they’ve never crashed one of them. And they all originate from down here—not from outer space—although we have an underground base on the Dark Side of the Moon that you really should see. It’s a marvel of engineering. As an architect, I’m sure you’d appreciate it.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. The stuff you’ve got down here is freaky enough already.”

Lloyd flashes me a beefy grin. “Like Al Jolson used to say, *‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!’*” As those words fly out of his mouth, he transforms into Black David Rockefeller.

I just roll with it. “Hey, Black David Rockefeller,” I say. “What brings you here, you freaky old fuck?” I feel like I’m talking to a Muppet on *Sesame Street*.

“I sensed your resistance to the idea that we might have a symbiotic relationship with humanity, rather than a strictly parasitic one,” Black David Rockefeller says in that mild, elegant way he has of speaking. Having experienced the original, I can tell that it’s still Yaldabaoth under the Black David Rockefeller

façade. He says, “I was summoned here to provide you with a deeper understanding of how invested we are in the outcome of the human enterprise.”

“Yeah, right. Are we talking, like, Rockefeller Foundation investments?” I ask him.

“That’s as good a place to start as any, I suppose.”

“German eugenics programs, making cancer drugs out of mustard gas, manufacturing consent with Edward Bernays-style propaganda tricks, secretly funding MKULTRA for the CIA... those were all Rockefeller Foundation projects, am I right?”

“That’s a rather skewed and limited view of our many accomplishments, but *Yes*, you’re essentially right—as far as that goes. But we also provided funding for community arts programs, we worked to eradicate hookworm in Mexico, and we were instrumental in the Green Revolution. Our stated mission is to promote the well-being of humanity throughout the world.”

“So you can steal our Loosh.”

“I can see I’m not getting through to you,” Black David Rockefeller says with a dignified pout. “Is that because you blame my family for global warming?”

“Your family certainly profited from it more than anyone else I can think of,” I retort.

“That’s unfair. No one could anticipate what burning all those fossil fuels would do to the environment. If it’s any consolation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund is now completely divested of all fossil fuel holdings. We’ll even be issuing a press release stating that we find ExxonMobil’s actions ‘morally reprehensible.’”

“Too little, too late,” I say. “Exxon’s a spinoff from Standard Oil. Your own in-house senior scientists warned you about the dangers of climate change at least as far back as 1977. And you’re only divesting now? You must think the easy money’s already been made, now that everyone’s talking about carbon taxes.”

Black David Rockefeller raises a shaky middle finger in my face and morphs into Black Jeb Bezos, who scowls at me and says:

“You just don’t get it, do you? Energy usage per capita has been growing at 2 to 3 percent a year for centuries now. And you humans benefit from that. You can’t say that you don’t. You live in a much better world than people lived in two hundred years ago, and a lot of that is tied to man’s ability to harness energy. You should be *thanking* David Rockefeller and his family.”

“That’s kind of like saying I should be thanking Big Tobacco for selling cigarettes to kids. We had great electric cars a century ago, and great electric railway services, but Ford, GM, and Big Oil colluded to wipe them out with cheap gas and bustitution.”

“So you’re one of those solar energy fanatics?”

“Of course! Harvesting clean, free energy from the sun has to be better than burning fossil fuels, don’t you think?”

“Well, if you’re so smart, I’m sure you can do the math: Americans will use about 98 quadrillion BTUs of energy this year. That’s the equivalent of 17 billion barrels of crude oil. If you compound that number by 2 percent for just a few hundred years, you’ll end up having to cover the entire Earth’s surface with solar cells. High-efficiency solar cells.”

“We’re smart enough not to cover the whole Earth in solar cells, Jeb. Get real,” I say.

“Regardless of what you think, in a few hundred years we’ll be using all the solar energy that impacts the Earth. That’s an actual limit. You can’t argue about it. It’s a thing.”

“So we’ll learn to live within our limits. Big deal.”

“Okay, sure. But if we expand out into the solar system, we can preserve Earth as, you know, kind of light industrial and residential. Keep this the great planet that it is and move all the heavy industry off Earth where there’s, for all practical purposes, limitless energy and limitless resources.”

“So you’re saying we *shouldn’t* live within limits? We should just eat up all the other planets around us? Spoken like a true capitalist. And who’ll do the work for you? Martian slaves? Because I’m sure you don’t want to be up there strip-mining asteroids all by yourself.”

Once again, with a hollow *whoomp*, I find myself surrounded by living cloud of shadow beings, immersing me in their fierce malevolence. I get the distinct impression Yaldabaoth is pissed.

You dare to sit there and pontificate on how we all should do better, he thunders at me from within my own head. *You, a mere mortal... a belching, farting, nose-picking sack of meat that shits like an animal every day.*

“Unless I’m constipated,” I say, just to keep things real.

The light around me is fading. I put my VR goggles back on, thinking they might help me to see things more clearly. They don’t really do much, aside from amping up the contrast on the shadows. The whole room is swimming with aquatic horrors. Every one of them seems intent on eating my brain.

Yaldabaoth stamps around inside my skull, bellowing: *I want to see you grovel. Face ME! Here, in the darkness, and tell me how you’d do things better.*

“Well, I’d start by making sure that psychopaths like you aren’t in charge everywhere,” I say. “Humanity doesn’t need any more Illuminati exploiters. We’ve already had plenty.”

You have no choice. You control nothing. I created you, so you owe me whatever I care to take.

My interior voice responds: *Who do you think you are, my dad?* I remember Gülru’s warning that Yaldabaoth would try to distract me from the things he didn’t want me to know.

“You didn’t create me and I don’t owe you a damn thing,” I say with absolute certitude. “You just want me to think that.”

I get up from the couch and start walking toward the far wall through the shadows. It turns out they can’t touch me.

Where do you think you’re going? This is MY realm! You’ll do as I say.

“Fuck off, Yaldabaoth,” I tell that evil subgod. “I’m outta here.” Then, even though it terrifies me, I pass through the doorway writhing with weird blue flames.

DEREK AND THE DEROS

Oh crap, what have I done? I think to myself. Did I just blow my only chance to find Pam? In my rush to get away from Yaldabaoth, I forgot to finalize our deal: Pam's safe return in exchange for my promise to shitcan *The Book of Beezos*.

Not that I think an amoral asshole like Yaldabaoth would ever keep his end of a bargain with "a mere mortal..." but *now what?* I can't go back. The doorway of weird blue flames I just came through has vanished. There's nothing behind me but a wall of rough-hewn rock. I'm in a tunnel. The only light comes from the same soft blue charge of static electricity that I saw on the stalactites leading up to Chapel Perilous. It flows whispering along the ceiling like a fog. Ahead of me, all I can see is a long, straight corridor of delaminating shale extending into darkness.

I start walking. "Gülru? Can you hear me?" I whisper.

Derek! You made it! She sounds ecstatic. *How'd it go with Yaldabaoth?*

"He seemed kind of aloof," I joke.

He didn't offer you a job?

"No." I have to laugh, overwhelmed by a giddy sense of relief. "If it was a job interview, I totally blew it. Everything I said just seemed to piss him off."

Good! That means your soul's still intact.

“Where are you?”

You're already heading my way. I can track you with the Moho equivalent of GPS.

“What's a Moho?” I ask her.

It's short for the Mohorovičić Discontinuity—the place you're in right now. It's an interlinked series of cavern-cities, tunnels, rivers, and seas about 20 miles below the Earth's surface. It honeycombs the whole planet. Its name comes from the Croatian seismologist who discovered it, Andrija Mohorovičić, but it's always been here.

Most people know it as hell.

“So hell is real?”

It is—although we don't call it hell anymore. Moho is trendier. Just like how Hell's Kitchen in New York City now gets called Clinton or Midtown West.

So hell is a geological fact, not a fairy tale. It figures. From the earliest days of man's recorded history, tales have been passed down about predators lurking in the subterranean depths: demons, trolls, vampires, giants, ogres, and other foul fuckers. Two millennia before Christ, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* gave us descriptions of Irkalla—the Mesopotamian underworld—a place populated by spirits, reanimated human corpses, and fierce guardians known as Scorpion Men. In the Hindu regions of Asia there's a strong belief in Nāgas, an ancient race of serpent-beings dwelling in underground cities, as depicted in the *Mahābhārata*. The *Popol Vuh* told of Mayan death gods who ruled from a court far beneath the Earth known as Xibalba (roughly translated as “place of fear”). The Greeks had their myths about Hades. And the Bible, of course, had its own ideas about Satan and how we'll all end up roasting in eternal napalm Jacuzzi's if we don't kowtow to the pedophile priests running rampant in the Catholic Church.

Then there are all the eyewitness accounts: some committed shaman or errant spelunker gets lost in a cave and comes back with hair-raising stories. For those brave souls who've endured

the harrowing of hell and returned to the surface world with that archaic knowledge, the rewards have tended to vary. Some were committed to insane asylums, like Richard Shaver. Others were burned at the stake, like the Templars who did double-duty as archaeologists under the Temple of Solomon. Still others were turned into cartoonish action figures of myth and epic poetry, like Orpheus, Inanna, Dante—and Muhammad, whose prophetic revelations arrived courtesy of a “luminous being” in the Cave of Hira, initially identified by Muhammad as Shaitan, or an *ifrit*, until his socially ambitious wife, Khadija (a rich widow fifteen years his senior), set him straight by having her Christian cousin tell Muhammad that it must have been the Angel Gabriel speaking to him on behalf of God, instead of a devil. We all know how well *that* worked out for Muslim women and anyone else that Muhammad’s more extremist followers decreed to be infidels (*A jihad on you all, motherfuckers!*).

Really, with all the anecdotal evidence, it shouldn’t come as any great shock that hell has been down here all along.

You’ve always been in hell, Gülru tells me. At least, ever since you got tricked into linear time, into a human body. The surface world is hell, too. That’s why things are so turned around up there, with a few thousand Archon-controlled psychopaths reaping billions and the rest of us slowly going broke and starving.

“I thought you said you were doing all right for yourself up there.”

I thought I was, but that’s only because I spend half my life down here. I’m like Persephone: six months of every year aboveground in Seattle, and six months below in the underworld, sucking off Hades. You wouldn’t want to trade places with me, Derek—trust me.

“So why put up with it? Can’t you do something else?”

I didn’t think I had a choice, until you showed up to remind me that I do. That’s why Yaldabaoth wants you to stop writing. Your books remind people that they carry a Divine Spark. They don’t have to accede to endless iterations of hell.

“But nobody reads anymore, Gülru. And I’m not exactly Virginia Woolf or Philip Roth, if you know what I mean.”

Doesn’t matter. Your books carry a plasmate—living information that imparts gnosis—so people can take the journey back to their divine origins. Yaldabaoth can’t fight that. He can’t kill an idea, or put it in prison. When the Spirit enters, the plasmate awakens. The right people will always find your books when they’re ready.

“Even though I say ‘fuck’ a lot?”

Fuck is just a four-letter word for intercourse, like the word talk. Your books are written in the language we use now, that’s all. Not everyone can get into the Gospel of Thomas and the Apocryphon of John—although those will do the job, too, of course.

So maybe, I think to myself, every now and then my books might have some positive impact on people, or on events.

Going the route of a perpetually broke indie author won’t be anywhere near so ego gratifying as following Yaldabaoth’s soul distracting path to worldly riches and power. But if I can help at least a few people escape from suffering one damned incarnation after another, then maybe my own incarnation on this for-profit, hyperdimensional prison planet will have been worth all the trouble. If human incarnation is a rigged game, my hope is that once we figure out how the Earth system works, we’ll be able to leave it. We’ll just need some good cheat codes for the afterlife—which gnosis provides.

The tunnel opens up into a wide and echoing passageway marked with rust-colored handprints on the limestone walls. I hear the growl of some subterranean monster lurking in the shadows up ahead.

That’s Garmr, Gülru tells me, hearing the same growl. I sent him to protect you. He’ll make sure you find me. He knows the way.

A gigantic wolfhound with blood-matted fur steps into the dim light of the passageway, his talon-like claws clicking and scratching against the rock floor. He looks like a satanic version of Clifford the Big Red Dog.

“Wow!” I marvel. “Was his mom one of the Clydesdales in those old Budweiser commercials?”

Don't be scared, Gülru says as Garmr bares his slavering fangs and growls. *He's friendly*. Through the thinner fur on his chest and belly, I glimpse a thick hide armored with rippling grey scales.

I've never been afraid of dogs. As a species, I think they more closely approach human ideals (*Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence, Courage without Ferocity...* as Byron phrased it) than most humans. I take a few steps toward Garmr and hold out my hand so he can sniff it. He noses my palm and takes in a few snuffling inhalations. Then his massive tail starts thumping against the sides of the passageway, brushing the limestone with blood. His wagging reassures me. I reach up and scratch the underside of his enormous hairy jaw.

“Hey, Garmr...” I say. “How'd you get to be such a big dog? What're they feeding you down here?”

He eats goblins, Gülru says. *Nasty, cannibalistic goblins... and other eldritch creatures. You'll run into a few along the way, I'm sure.*

“So that blood on him?”

It isn't his. Garmr likes to roll around in the blood of his enemies. It throws them off his scent.

“So instead of a giant hellhound, when Garmr's enemies get a wind of him they think they're just being stalked by a furry goblin that's bleeding out from multiple stab wounds.”

Something like that, yeah.

That's when I realize that the handprints on the limestone walls weren't intended to be decorative. They're painted in blood, not ochre. I look down. Crusty dried bloodstains are also spattered all over the passageway's floor.

“Cool,” I say. “Do I get an elf sword, in case some berserk cave-troll gets past him?”

Sorry, we're all out of elf swords. You're not Frodo in the Mines of Moria. But don't worry... when the goblins see Garmr, they usually turn and run the other way.

"And if they don't?"

My suggestion? Pick up a rock and improvise.

"Great." I look around for a rock. I find one that's about the size of an axe head with a nice smooth curve toward the center, for easy gripping. Then I say to Garmr, "Okay, big guy, let's go find Gülru."

He only understands Old Norse, Gülru informs me, but go ahead, keep talking to him... I'm sure he'll get the gist.

Garmr turns around and starts walking back into darkness from whence he came. He looks over his bloodstained shoulder to make sure I'm following him, and then he picks up the pace.

A river of fossils is embedded in the limestone ceiling overhead: a jumble of broken shells, bony splayed fins, and skeletal ribs—mineralized evidence of biological life going back millions of years. It reminds me that my own life takes place in the blink of a cosmological eye when looked at from the context of geological time. There I am, a "mere mortal" of no more consequence than a cockroach, trotting along behind the towering hindquarters of the world's biggest wolfhound. It feels demeaning somehow, like I'm being led around on a leash, but we keep it up for a while.

Just as I'm starting to feel winded, Garmr stops and suddenly squats on his back haunches. His long tail stiffens, nearly poking me in the chest. *Stay back*, it seems to warn me.

Did Garmr see a goblin? I wonder, tightening my grip on the rock. *Is he getting ready to pounce?*

No, it's nothing like that. I watch as Garmr's colossal pink anus dilates and squeezes out several compact turds, each about the size of a baby rhino. They hit the ground with damp, echoing thuds and slowly topple over.

By the time Garmr's business is finished, the pile reaches almost to my shoulders—a hulking mound of dog shit scaled up to the size of a Jeff Koons sculpture. It's studded with gnawed bones and golden nuggets that look like corn (which, upon closer inspection, turn out to be tartar-encrusted fangs from what I assume must be goblins). Garmr seems to have no compunction about shitting “like an animal” in Yaldabaoth's underworld kingdom.

The mound smells just as bad as you might expect a mound of dog-digested flesh-eating goblins to smell. If I hadn't spent the last few years bagging Trout's poop on a regular basis, I probably would have gagged as I walked past it. I jog ahead of Garmr to get beyond the stench, no longer quite so concerned about goblins leaping out at me from the darkness.

Obviously, Garmr knows how to handle them.

Up ahead, the passageway opens up into a gigantic chamber. It's so huge that it generates its own microweather. Ghostly clouds drift overhead through the darkness. The clouds are lit from below by an undulating blanket of bioluminescence floating on the surface of a black underground sea. Garmr walks out with me to a rocky white shore composed of surf-smoothed gypsum stones—or possibly white marble. I'm not a geologist, so who knows? White beach, black water... as usual, it's a study in contrasts down here in hell. The shore is strewn with toppled black obelisks and strange, mossy statues depicting vulture-faced humanoid creatures with erect phalluses, scaly legs, and short, stubby feathered wings. They remind me of Pazuzu—the Assyrian wind demon that played a role in the *Exorcist* movies. Or maybe the Mothman, from that book by John Keel.

“Is that what I'll see if we run into goblins?” I ask Gülrü, pointing.

Close, she says. But only the Draconians have wings. The goblins are their foot soldiers.

“Do they go around with their hard-ons sticking out like that all the time?”

No. I think the hard-ons are there just for show. Whenever I see them, they're usually wearing jockstraps made from flayed human skin.

"So they use humans for leather down here? No wonder this place is giving me the creeps."

Yeah, she concurs. By the way, don't go near the water. I'm pretty sure there's a Leviathan out there.

"You mean a giant sea serpent?"

I mean a Leviathan, just like I said. Get back.

I take a few steps away from the shore as Garmr squares his stance and lets out a low warning growl. The black water ripples and seems to rise toward the center as weird undersea lights slip past, gleaming like gold coins. I imagine some humpbacked monster cruising out there, just below the surface, flexing its aquatic muscles.

Then I get to see the monster up close.

Holy fucking hell! A goddam sea dragon explodes from the depths, fizzing water like a bomb. I watch, stupefied, as it wrestles its long body up on the shore. It's all fangs and spiky red scales. Behind the fangs, I see reflective shark-like eyes with nictitating membranes and whale-sized corneas oozing pure malice. I also see horns. Not the sleek, curving horns of a Minotaur. More like stag antlers, or branching coral formations. And fangs. Did I mention fangs? A horrible shrieking mouthful of them, headed straight toward me.

Garmr is on the Leviathan in an instant. I didn't even see him tense to leap, but there he goes, flying to meet the sea dragon in mid-air. His jaws sink into the creature's neck. There's a sudden rending of flesh. Garmr has just widened someone's gill slits, I'm guessing. The sea dragon pivots, bellows, spews some horrible stinking gas that befouls the air. To its disadvantage, it's more serpent than dragon, with only vestigial arms. Garmr has the edge on land. He digs his paws in, dragging the beast out of the water with ferocious shakes of his head. The Leviathan whips about like some furious rattlesnake, flinging great flak-bursts of

shore stones everywhere. I hear their machine-gun patter rattling off the statues and obelisks.

The Leviathan's tail snakes under Garmr's legs and starts coiling around his midsection, squeezing him like a python. Garmr responds by biting deeper into its neck. I hear the sound of ribs cracking. A blood-fumed yelp bursts from Garmr's clenching jowls as he flops over on his side, crushing the Leviathan beneath him.

I can't tell who's winning, but I know whose side I'm on.

"Gülru, jack up the power to my suit like you did when I was wrestling," I tell her. There's no time to ask her nicely. I'm already leaning over to pick up an obelisk.

Okay. GO! she says inside my head.

The heavy stone obelisk is obsidian black and covered with weird-looking runes. It's about nine feet long and must weigh at least half a ton. Even with the exoskeleton suit's extra boost, my muscles are straining and the bones in my forearms feel like they might snap like toothpicks. Somehow, I manage to lift the obelisk onto my shoulder. Then I run with it like a pole-vaulter. I'll only have one chance. I stagger onto the Leviathan's snapping red snout and then I plant the pointy end of the obelisk right in its hateful fucking eye.

There's a sickening splash of vitreous fluid against my legs. I grab the inverted square bottom of the obelisk and push it deeper. That does it. The constricting muscles in the Leviathan's long tail spasm and then go slack. Garmr unclenches his jaws and takes a deep breath. Then he goes back in and rips out the creature's throat. A spume of arterial blood spray drenches us both.

One monster down, I think to myself. But how many more will we have to get past?

"Gülru, how close are you?" I ask her.

I wish I could say you're right around the corner, but you're not. You still have a few miles ahead of you. Good job on the Leviathan, though. The goblins should be a piece of cake, after that.

"Thanks for the boost," I say. "I couldn't have done it without you."

I notice that Garmr is having some trouble shaking off the Leviathan's coils and getting back on his feet. He looks shaky. Uncertain.

Uh-oh... I think Garmr might be hurt, Gülru says, looking at him through my VR goggles.

"Yeah, me too," I say. "I thought I heard some ribs cracking. Is there anything I can do?"

He might have to stay by the sea. Eating Leviathan's meat will heal him. Just not right away.

"Should I stay with him?"

You don't have time. You need to get back up to the surface to find Pam, remember?

I remember. Despite all the weirdness I've encountered, I've been thinking of little else.

I should be able to guide you the rest of the way, Gülru adds. *You'll just have to sneak past the goblins.*

"Can I say goodbye first?"

Of course. Say these words to Garmr before you go: Sitja. Matask.

"Sitja... Matask..." I repeat.

Close enough, says Gülru. No one seems thrilled with the way I pronounce words down in hell.

I go over to Garmr, who's given up trying to stand and now rests on his side in a shallow depression of beach stones beside the exsanguinated sea-dragon. His breathing is shallow. I worry that his battle wounds might be more serious than I'd thought, but his big brown eyes are clear and lucid. They follow me as I approach him. When I lean my body against his chest and stroke his neck with both arms, his tail slaps the stones with a few good whaps.

"Garmr, I have to go," I say. For a giant warrior dog, he sure has silky ears. "Thanks for getting me this far."

Garmr scooches around on his front paws and manages to raise his head upright. He puts his massive black nose in my face and takes in a few quivering sniffs. I could easily fit my head inside one of his nostrils. Instead, I scratch his bloody chin. Then his enormous pink tongue flicks out and gets in a few licks on the side of my face. It's such a pure act of canine kindness that I feel my heart swelling with love.

Garmr—my friend and protector. I'll never forget him.

He tries again to struggle to his feet, but I tell him: "Sitja... Matask..." and his body relaxes. With a slight groan, Garmr goes back to lying on his side. His tail keeps wagging though, as if he wants to assure me that he'll be okay. I give him a few more loving pats and a kiss on his big nose. Then I head on my way.

There are two tunnels leading out of the sea cavern, in addition to the one I came in through. *Take the tunnel to your left*, Gülru advises me before I can even ask her which way to go. It's like having one of those computerized lady voices giving me directions from a GPS navigator, only more personal: I've never seen the computerized lady naked.

"Where to now?" I ask Gülru.

The lost city of R'lyeh, she says. *Or at least that's what I call it.*

"H.P. Lovecraft, right?"

Right. Spend enough time down here and you start to get Lovecraft on the brain.

"Not my favorite writer. I'd rather be fishing somewhere in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, thinking about Jim Harrison. Or hanging out at Nepenthe in Big Sur, re-reading John Steinbeck and Henry Miller.

If you can avoid the goblins, you might get that chance.

Or how about Paris? Cocteau... Voltaire... Rousseau.... Have you spent much time in Paris?

Too many gargoyles. Paris is kind of ruined for me now.

"Too bad."

Yeab. You need to stop talking now. You're coming up on the outskirts of the city.

The tunnel hasn't looked like anything special up to this point, but that starts to change. I see a pale orange glow reflecting on the basalt walls up ahead. It flickers like flames. I wonder if I'm about to get a glimpse of hell's legendary fire and brimstone. *What the hell is brimstone, anyway?* I wonder to myself. *Is it another name for lava?*

The air in the tunnel starts to smell like a yeti just farted after eating an entire picnic basket full of deviled eggs. *Sulfur...* I remember now. *Brimstone is an archaic name for sulfur.*

The smell keeps getting stronger. It's like I'm entering the City of Lost Fart Monsters.

Shit! Go left! In the crack! Gülru shouts inside my head just as I'm about to pass a dark jagged fissure in the wall. The crack is about the height of a closet door and barely wide enough for me to squeeze through. However, I can feel it dilating as I push into it—although by how much I can't really tell, since my body is blocking most of the light now coming from behind me.

Go deeper! Faster! Gülru tells me, as if she's coaching me during sex. *I'll turn on your infrared and ultraviolet so you can see better.*

I take off at a half-run into pure darkness, hoping I won't end up tripping over something, or smacking my head on a low overhang. Then the view through my VR goggles abruptly brightens. I can see the rock walls around me now. The crack has opened into a garage-sized cul-de-sac with a level, sandy floor.

That was close, Gülru says. *Get down and stay quiet.*

I crouch with my back against the far wall and make myself small and quiet. In a few moments, watching through the crack, I see several naked sunburned men passing through the outer corridor. Only they're not quite naked. They're wearing jockstraps (*made out of flayed human skin*, I remind myself). And they're not quite men. They have pointy goblin ears, bat-like snouts, fangs, and oversized, misshapen heads. Few of them have

any hair above their protruding, ape-like brows, but most of them have beards, and all of them have a couple of knobby, coral-like outgrowths branching from their foreheads. I wouldn't call them horns, exactly; they look more like some proliferating form of bone cancer. Add in the peeling red skin and you have something that resembles the classic depiction of a devil—only shorter and more fucked up looking, while lacking the traditional spiked tail and cloven hooves.

Those are the goblins, Gülru tells me. Don't ever let one bite you. Their saliva is infectious to humans.

"Good to know..." I mutter.

Shut up! They might hear you. You need to stay put for a while. I'm tracking them now. I'll tell you when it's safe to go back out.

I make a masturbation gesture in front of my VR goggles to show Gülru the goblins don't scare me. But that's just mindless bravado. Actually, the goblins terrify me. I've never been much of a fighter and those guys are out there walking around with human skin leather covering their nutsacks.

There's something else about them that bothers me. I don't know how to explain it, really. It's more a feeling than anything visible. Somehow, they feel *dense* to me—like their atoms are packed tighter than mine—as if seething resentment or negativity has made them contract on a subatomic level. Maybe it's just the air pressure down here... I don't know... but my instincts are telling me that if I smashed a rock into a goblin's face, that rock would just crumble or bounce off without causing any harm.

How do you fight something like that? I ask myself. *Especially if it spits venom?*

I think Gülru might have misinterpreted my masturbation gesture, because a few minutes later her avatar shows up in the chamber with me, totally nude. I'm still sitting with my back against the wall and I can't object because I can't talk, right? Besides, now that I'm used to seeing that crazy Aizen Myō'ō

tattoo on her torso, I find that Gülru's naked avatar body turns me on more than it freaks me out.

Gülru leans over to give me a long, deep French kiss. Then she spreads her lean legs and puts her tattooed crotch right in my face while she reaches high and finds some handholds in the limestone wall above me. I start eating her out while I finger her G-spot—because it's only virtual, right? Why not? That goes on for a while, until I feel her cunt spasm and flood my mouth with hot salty wetness.

(How the hell could virtual reality pull off an effect like that? I'll ask myself later.)

My exoskeleton suit has virtually disappeared by that point. My not-so-virtual hard-on is throbbing. Gülru straddles me and proceeds to give me the most exquisite VR fucking of my life. We take it to completion this time—enjoying multiple positions and multiple orgasms—while both of us stay absolutely silent, which somehow makes everything sexier.

If I manage to get out of here alive, how will I ever explain this to Pam? I wonder as I lay on my back, breathing hard and feeling sticky in my cum-sodden nanogel underpants. I sort of feel raped, but not really. *Used* might be a better term for it. Gülru's avatar disappeared right after our grand finale of simultaneous orgasms. She's still not talking to me. My guess is she was just bored and horny and decided she wanted a hard virtual dick to get off on.

In the back of my mind I hear a snatch of David Lee Roth singing: *When the end comes I know they'll say just a gigolo / Life goes on without me.*

Okay the coast is clear, Gülru announces through the VR goggles' bone phones about fifteen minutes later. *You can get out of there now.*

"Um, Gülru, we really need to have a talk..." I say with awful self-consciousness.

About what? she asks me.

"About fucking in virtual reality. I mean, it felt great, but—"

You mean what we did in your brother's apartment?

"No. Just a little while ago."

I've been tracking goblins for the last hour. There's no way I could've fucked you. I had to concentrate.

"Then whose pussy was I eating just now?"

Jesus, Derek! You were licking my clit?

"Well, yeah!"

Gülru giggles. *Well, thanks... but it wasn't me.*

"Whose clit was it then?" I'm starting to freak out.

I hear Gülru trying to suppress her laughter, but she's doing a bad job of it. *If I had to guess... she sighs mirthfully, I'd say it was probably Yaldabaoth.*

"Yaldabaoth?!"

He's a shape-shifter, remember? He's pretended to be me before.

"Yaldabaoth just busted a gusher in my mouth? Are you kidding?"

I'm revolted right down to my animal core. I lean over and gag, coughing out warm spit.

I hear Gülru laughing her head off while I retch. After we both calm down, she tries to explain through her giggles: *I didn't think he'd follow you through the blue flame doorway. I guess I was wrong. Either that, or it was Lilith.*

"Who's Lilith?" I ask. *At least she sounds female,* I think to myself. My eyes are watering. I take off my VR goggles to wipe away the tears and find myself in utter darkness. I quickly put them back on.

...she steals men's sperm and gives birth to monsters, Gülru is saying.

"Wait—*what?* Can you say that again?" I ask her. "I think I missed the first part."

Gülru backtracks and says: *I was explaining to you that Lilith was the demon-bride of Adam. The first wife, before Eve—the one*

nobody likes to talk about. Yaldabaoth keeps her around so she can breed monsters, which she does by showing up as a succubus and stealing men's sperm. So check your shorts. See if anything's missing.

My nanogel shorts still feel sticky. "I'm pretty sure my sperm's all there," I tell her.

Then it was Yaldabaoth.

"Fuck!"

Oh, it's not that bad... Gülru says, as if consoling a little boy who's bruised his chin. If Yaldabaoth showed up as me, then for all intents and purposes he was me. It's not like he's locked into an exclusively male form. The only thing that might've given him away was his voice. Did you guys talk much?

"Um, no. You told me not to, remember?"

Oh, right.... Well, look at it this way: you just got fucked by the Genghis Khan of the Archons, their king of hell, the prince of the powers of the air. In a way, you could take it as a compliment. You should be flattered that he thought you were interesting enough to even bother with.

"What are you, his PR agent?"

Please. Give me some credit. Obviously, Yaldabaoth knows I've been helping you. He's probably known all along. I'm sure it must've pissed him off, but instead of killing you, he decided to screw you. That says something about him, don't you think?

"Yeah. It says he's sneaky and bisexual."

How was it, by the way?

"What? The sex?" I try to downplay it. "It wasn't bad. But I'm sure it would've been even better with you."

You are such a liar! Nice try with the chivalry, though... Gülru tells me. And just knowing that you thought it was me while you were getting off with Yaldabaoth kind of makes me adore you. So let's get you out of there before the goblins come back. Then maybe you can do me for real, in person.

"Um, yeah, about that..."

Just kidding. I know you still love Pam. C'mon, let's go. Slide yourself out of that crack and come to R'lyeh—otherwise known as Emerald City, Moho—where hordes of cannibal goblins lay hidden in green slimy vaults, darkly dreaming.

That's where you'll find me.



Without Garmr, Gülru tells me, I can't walk straight into the city as she'd originally planned. Instead, she helps me navigate through a complex labyrinth of unlit basalt tunnels bored through the solid rock by ancient rivers of hydrogen-sulfide brine—basically, sulfuric acid—which had wormed their way up from deeper layers and then retreated.

Hence, the hideous deviled-egg-fart smell.

After a few very difficult hours, I finally arrive at a high cliff with an open ledge overlooking a vast metropolis: Emerald City, Moho. According to Gülru, it's Seattle's underground sister city, built in an abyssal cavern 18 miles beneath Puget Sound long before Seattle was even a word. The oldest sections of the city date back over 25,000 years.

What I'm seeing is trippy as hell. First of all, there's a fire roiling across the cavern's immense dome. And I'm talking about a massive inferno, something like a thousand acres of lightning-torched forest flipped upside down and blazing out of control. But there's no smoke, there's very little heat, and the fire doesn't seem to be consuming anything. Aside from some buttery limestone stalactites, there's not much up there for it to burn, anyway. Maybe it's the crimson and forbidding equivalent of the soft blue static electricity I saw on my way into Chapel Perilous.

I ask Gülru about it and she explains: *It's a plasma cloud that generates its own magnetic field, which acts as a containment barrier as it travels through the open air. It stays magnetically tethered to the stalactites, providing the city with light and warmth, just like a miniature sun. The only drawback is that the plasma also pumps out*

UV radiation like the sun—which is why everyone is sunburned down here. If you’ve ever wondered why devils are usually depicted as having red skin, there’s your answer. Without the plasma, they’d all be fish-belly white, because goblins evolved from Homo erectus in almost total darkness over the span of a few million years.

“So what you’re saying is they’re cave-dwelling albino cannibals who enjoy parboiling themselves to death.”

That about sums it up, although to give them some credit, they probably get less UV rays than we do on the surface. The goblins are just melanin-deficient, so they burn easier. But they’re used to it now. It’s a matter of pride among the males to keep up a deep red skinburn. For them, it’s like having a good tan. The females are more sensible. They spend most of their time indoors. There’s even a prevalent fetish among male goblins for concubines that are white as angels.

“The same thing goes on upstairs with rednecks and geishas,” I say. “Maybe we’re not so different, after all.”

Oh, the goblins are very different. You’ll see....

I look out over the city, trying to take it all in. In a way, it reminds me of the Italian villages along the Amalfi Coast. Emerald City has been built into an enclave of hills leading down to the shore of a black underground sea—probably the same sea that Garmr and I saw earlier. Most of the structures appear to have been made with hell’s own version of emerald-tinted shotcrete. It’s a city of stone with a freaky Dr. Seuss vibe: lots of igloo-type dwellings with oddly shaped windows, drooping spires, and staircases as steep as any you’d find on an Aztec temple. In fact, the decorative arts of ancient South American tribes—Aztec, Mayan, Olmec—seem to be in evidence everywhere. The walls and colonnades are embellished with carved depictions of huge serpents, vulture-faced lizard gods, and figures in strange flying machines—all of it blended in subtle arabesques. The domes of amphitheaters and cathedrals are topped with gargantuan, sullen-faced Olmec-style stone heads, making them look like temples to gluttony.

Two silver disc-shaped UFOs are flitting about in the domelike “sky” above the city. Somehow, they look no more out

of place there than the black helicopters I've seen over Manhattan. They zip around and hover in zany hummingbird flight patterns—an example of anti-gravity technology at its finest, I presume.

“Are those the same sort of UFOs that Kenneth Arnold saw over Mt. Rainier?” I ask Gülru.

They're newer models, of course, she answers, but yeah, the field propulsion vehicles that Kenneth Arnold saw came from down here—not outer space—just like all UFOs that I know of.

“Are they flown by goblins?”

No way. Goblins can't be trusted around FPVs. That'd be like handing a 12-year-old pyromaniac a box full of matches and the keys to a fireworks factory and saying “Go have fun!” It could only end in disaster.

“They're that bad, huh?”

They're degenerates—cannibals and rapists with very little common sense or self-control. That's why whenever you see FPVs aboveground, they're almost always piloted by Galaturs—inorganic programmed life forms specifically designed to obtain genetic material from the surface world. Their job is to kidnap humans and mutilate farm animals, just like the goblins would, but they do it without getting emotional. You know them as Greys. But the real Greys are the tall grey Archons that control the Galaturs, who were made in their image.

“Like that thing I saw when Black Henry Kissinger did his shape-shifting number.”

Right. He's one.

“And what about that other thing that David Rockefeller shifted into—the creepy lizard dude with wings?”

He's a Draconian, the oldest and most powerful branch of Archons. They're like the generals in Yaldabaoth's underworld army.

“So you've got Draconians, their goblin foot soldiers, the Tall Greys, and their little grey Galatur sidekicks. Does that pretty much sum up the population down here, or am I missing something?”

Bigfoot. The Yetis make their home in the Moho, but I doubt you'll run into any down here. They're sort of like Garmr—they don't get along well with goblins.

“Anything else?”

Well, there's a ton of human slaves—more than you'd ever imagine—and also some humans who come down here voluntarily to work with the Archons, like the people at Blue Orgazon, Los Alamos, Dulce, Raven Rock, and Area 51.

“Area 51 has an elevator that goes straight to hell?”

Of course! Where do you think they got all that “alien” technology that went into their spy planes? They're flying hell's own black triangles out of there now.

“You're blowin' my fuckin' mind here, Gülru.”

Oh, don't be so dramatic... you've always known something like this was going on.

“But those were just conspiracy theories.”

They're not conspiracy theories when you have all the facts. Now head back into that cave you just came out of. You'll see a camouflaged elevator on your left. It's a secret entrance to Glamazon's Blue Orgazon lab. Only a few people know about it. We use that ledge for partying when we play bookey from work.

“Are you inside Blue Orgazon now?”

No, but you're getting warm. I'm in a dungeon right beneath it.

“They've got you locked up?”

Didn't I already tell you that? Yes, they have me locked up. It's not the first time. Glamazon is a notoriously difficult place to work.

“But at least you get stock options, right?”

It takes four years before they fully vest. Half the people they hire people don't even last 18 months.

“Holy shit! Glamazon must be brutal, if people can't stand working there long enough to cash out.”

Churn and burn—that's their strategy. Now let's get going. The elevator code is 73169. Once you're inside the lab, act like you work there. You're already wearing the exoskeleton suit. That should help.

Inside the cave I find a discreetly hidden freight elevator. Its doors are textured and painted to match the surrounding basalt. On the rock wall above someone has written in pale blue chalk:

Welcome to Zadlaška

“What's Zadlaška?” I have to ask.

It's the Slovenian cave that supposedly inspired Dante's vision of hell. Sort of an inside joke, Gülru informs me. C'mon... let's get going. The Down button is under that rock next to your hand.

I find the concealed button, press it, and the freight elevator's doors slide up and down like a rock monster's gaping jaws. The interior is all raw black steel, dimly lit. I find a keypad in there and punch in the code: 73169. As the elevator begins to descend I feel a shudder of foreboding, although I'm not sure why. I'm already in hell. How much worse could things get?

The elevator deposits me at the end of a long dark corridor lined on either side with pod-like aquarium tanks. Each curved glass and stainless steel tank is about twelve feet high by six feet wide and connected to all kinds of copper tubes and black-clad cables. I've seen enough alien conspiracy videos on UTube to immediately suspect that the tanks will contain floating nude human clones growing in synthetic amniotic fluid so their organs can be harvested later. But that's not what I find. The tanks are empty. Or not empty, exactly—each is full of bubbling fluids that range in color from piss yellow to amber and molasses—but they don't contain floating clones or anything of that nature.

“What's up with the tanks, Gülru?” I ask.

Blue Orgazon has its own on-site microbrewery.

“That's awesome!” Mystery solved. “I thought it was a human clone farm,” I admit.

That's downstairs, she says. There's a fridge just ahead of you if you want a beer.

"Cool!"

I find the refrigerator—a Smeg 50's Retro Style model that looks jarringly out of place. It's painted to resemble the British Union Jack. When I open it up, I discover that Glamazon has its own private brewery label: *Brewskizon*. The shelves are lined with *Brewskizon Pilsner*, *Brewskizon Belgian-Style IPA*, *Brewskizon Irish Red Ale*, *Brewskizon Marzen*, *Brewskizon Imperial Porter*.... I haven't eaten in days, so I grab a few liter-sized bottles of Imperial Porter. It's the closest thing I can think of to liquid bread.

"Is there an opener around here somewhere?" I ask Gülru.

Check the side of the refrigerator, she says.

Sure enough... I pop the caps off the two bottles of Porter. The beer tastes delicious. I ask, "Would you mind if I just hang out here until I get a little buzz goin'?"

Oh sure, Derek, leave me sitting alone in a shit-stinking dungeon while you get your drunk on.

"Okay, fine. I'm coming. Where do I go next?"

End of the corridor, then make a right, Gülru says, appeased. You'll be walking right past a nanogel fabrication cleanroom, so look like you own that suit you're wearing.

"I'll do my best Keanu Reeves impression," I promise her. Giving her a taste, I deadpan: "My name... is Neo."

Don't tell anyone your name is Neo, you dork. They'll call security.

I chug down the sudsy dregs of the first Porter and start on the second. "Can I take this with me?" I ask, hoisting the big bottle up in front of my VR goggles.

Sure. It'll make you look like you belong. A lot of the engineers and code monkeys down here are raging alcoholics—for good reasons.

As I reluctantly leave the microbrewery behind, I hear music coming from the other end of the long, antiseptic-looking

hallway to my right. Walking toward the music's source, I recognize the tune as The O'Jays classic, "Back Stabbers."

The liter of beer in my formerly empty belly makes me feel as if hell is spinning in greased grooves. *It's not so bad down here, after all...* I think to myself. I start doing a funky white boy shuffle to the music as I continue along.

At the hallway's midpoint, the blank white wall on my left becomes floor-to-ceiling glass. Through it, I see a goblin version of a high-tech Busby Berkeley spectacle in progress. Inside is a well-lighted factory floor full of robotic arms and computerized manufacturing devices—like any cleanroom you might see in a semiconductor plant—but dancing amid all that exotic machinery are dozens of female goblins wearing white lab coats and semi-transparent teal bouffant hair net caps. And I mean they're *really* dancing—every move totally synchronized among all fifty or sixty of them. It's like watching the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall.

Only way uglier.

(What they do) / (They smile in your face) / All the time they wanna take your place / The back stabbers / (Back stabbers...)

The music is booming. Each syncopated goblin handclap and booty shake is perfect, choreographed like a murmuration of starlings in flight. I see real joy spreading across the goblins' pasty white pug faces, merriment sparkling in their bleached blue eyes. They're so caught up in the song that they don't see me. I just stand there at the window, gawking.

You should keep moving, Derek, Gülru warns me.

But I'm enthralled. My body is grooving on autopilot, trying to match the goblinettes, move for move. When they raise their arms and collectively spin in place toward the finale, I raise my beer and spin with them, croaking in a buzzy falsetto:

I don't need low down / Dirty bastards

That's when they see me.

Abruptly, the fangs come out. Interspecies hatred transforms their faces. I seem to have intruded upon a private goblin ritual.

Oh fuck. Run! Gülru shouts inside my head.

I run down the hallway as the goblins swarm the glass door ahead of me. Luckily, the door behind them has to fully close to seal them off in a small isolation chamber before they can open the door to the hallway. That slows them down enough for me to get past them.

Go right! Gülru shouts. *There's an exit stairwell fifty feet ahead. Take it.*

I go right and see the exit sign. The first few goblins are behind me now, hair-net-capped horrors. I hit the exit and pivot down the stairs.

Keep going all the way to the bottom, Gülru says.

Down I go, two steps at a time. I hear the goblins scrabbling after me. One of them slips and comes tumbling down the stairs. I see her hit the landing above me with her face, *hard*, but she bounces right back up and keeps coming, nose and lips bleeding greenish-yellow ichor onto her fangs. She's so close that I freak the fuck out and go through the next door, slamming it shut behind me.

I put my back against the door and feel the goblin crash into it. The door bumps open but I get it closed again. I look down and—miracle of miracles—I see a deadbolt above the door handle. Safe fire exit strategies must be a low priority in hell. I turn the deadbolt just before the goblin slams against the other side again. The door doesn't budge. *Fuck her.*

Okay, nice move, Gülru congratulates me. *You just bought some time. This is the genomic research floor. Head left up the corridor and we'll find another way out.*

I feel like I'm in one of those first-person shooter video games, only I don't have a gun. What's next? Flesh-eating zombies? Spear-chucking Scorpion Men? I walk along the corridor with a racing heart. I need a weapon. The Hammer of Thor, nunchuks, a bazooka... I don't care what it is—I just want

some death-dealing implement to swing or shoot so I won't be utterly defenseless.

"Any chance I could get a gun somewhere?" I ask Gülru.

Guns and tunnels don't mix, she tells me. The sound blows your ears out and the ricochets end up killing a lot of innocent bystanders. But I know something better. Take another left up here. We're going to Werner Herzog's office.

"Werner Herzog has an office down here?"

Yeah, he's been shooting a documentary about the Moho for Glamazon Original Movies. Of course, it'll be released as science fiction when it plays in the surface world.

"Hell gets weirder all the time..." I grumble. Gülru tells me to hand over my VR goggles to Werner when I see him, and she'll explain everything to him for me.

It takes a while, but I finally find Werner Herzog sitting behind a vintage steel desk in a dimly-lit office, surrounded by a large black projection screen and several tall storage racks filled with video camera equipment, hot lights, and nests of cables. In a way, the scene reminds me of a more organized version of Pam's living room, where she shoots her UTube videos. Werner is wearing a black suit, a gray shirt, and no tie. He waves me inside when he sees me knocking at his plate glass window.

"Yes? May I help you?" he asks in a chilly, very precise Bavarian accent, which I recognize from his films.

I introduce myself, feeling nervous: "My name's Derek Swannson. Gülru sent me here to find you. She wants to talk to you, if you don't mind."

I take off my VR goggles and pass them across the desk. Werner Herzog is still Werner Herzog, even with the VR goggles removed. His droopy eyebrows and natural scowl lend his face a ghoulish cast. He takes the VR goggles from me and puts them on as if they're just another way to communicate, one step above a cell phone. With his rheumy blue eyes obscured, his face goes from ghoulish to flat-out sinister.

"Yes, Gülru, how are you?" He nods his bald head while putting a hand to one of the gray tufts of hair above his ears, as if that might help him hear her better. "I see," he says after a pause. And then, "I have exactly the right tools. A filmmaker must always carry bolt cutters." After another long pause: "No, I want to join him so I can record your emancipation. I've said before that I would travel down to hell and wrestle a film away from the devil if it was necessary. Now I shall keep my word. *The Harrowing of Hell* must continue. I'll see you soon, my sweet Tlazolteotl."

Werner hands the VR goggles back to me and says, "We must be good soldiers of cinema today. I will go with you to rescue Gülru." He stands up from behind the desk and goes over to one of the storage racks.

"Wow, thanks!" I say. "I really appreciate that... but have you seen how fast those goblins move?"

"If you're implying that I'm too old to contend with goblins, you are mistaken," Werner answers with his back to me. "I've already encountered substantial hordes of them. They are the most vile, cannibalistic, and nightmarish creatures in the Moho, but we have a mutual respect for each other now—even as we plan each other's murder." He turns around with a futuristic-looking raygun in his hand, pointed at me. "A massive, naked onslaught of goblins can be no worse than working with Klaus Kinski."

"Is that thing loaded?" I ask.

"A gift for you," he says, handing over the raygun. "You may find it useful. Unless, like me, you prefer close combat."

"Um, no," I say. "Killing from a distance is fine, if we have to kill anything at all."

"That raygun is meant to only stun. It will not kill." Werner turns away from me again to strap himself into a weirdly padded vest with crisscrossed double scabbards in back. When he turns around again, he's holding two wicked-looking katana swords made of strange black metal. "These kill, when used properly,"

he tells me. “The blades are made of meteorite iron—very deadly to goblins. I have an extra set, if you’d like your own pair.”

“Hell, yes!” I say. “Strap me up with those bad boys.” It’s not like I’ve ever been to ninja school... I have no fucking clue what to do with twin katana swords, but the appeal of looking like a badass is trumping my sound judgment.

Werner deftly slides his katana swords into the scabbards on his back. Then he hands me a second vest with the swords already in place. He also supplies me with a black leather hip holster for the raygun, along with a weighty black Maglite flashlight and a long-handled pair of bright red bolt cutters.

“What’re these for?” I ask, regarding the bolt cutters.

“They’re for liberating Gülru from her dungeon.”

“Oh. Okay. That makes sense. So are we ready to roll?”

“Almost.”

I see now that Werner’s katana sword outfit doubles as a Steadicam vest. He fastens a dual-armed motion stabilizer onto the front of it and then mounts a lightweight, portable 3-D movie camera on top of the stabilizer.

“Now we are prepared,” Werner says with crisp Bavarian confidence. “Let’s go achieve something extraordinary before we die—as we must—alone in our own filth.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to carry that for you?” I ask, referring to the movie camera setup. “It looks heavy.” Werner must be at least seventy by now.

“I must carry the camera to capture the essential rhythms during filming, to find the ecstatic truth of the scene,” he says. “But thank you for asking.”

We go out the office door and walk down the corridor. Werner waves and has brief conversations with some of the members of his crew in their offices along the way. I’m no longer quite so worried about being found out as an imposter, now that Werner Herzog is walking alongside me. He seems to have the run of the place.

"How long have you been down here?" I ask him.

"Nine weeks. We finished shooting a few days ago. I was getting ready to start editing. But now, after speaking to Gülru, I see a need for deeper explorations."

"How far down does that dungeon go, anyway?"

"It goes deep," Werner answers me. "Deep into the abyss. But that's what I'm after. I want to go into the deepest recesses of the human soul—as at least far as you can scrutinize with a camera."

Werner turns to face an unmarked door. He takes a digital passkey from his pocket and inserts it into a titanium slot next to the doorframe. The door clicks opens. We go inside. I see a long, dark corridor lined with thick glass walls forming individual cells. Powerful LED lights blink on from both sides of Werner's 3-D camera. He starts filming.

"This is Blue Orgazon's genomic research facility," Werner narrates for me, "where the Greys and Draconians have been mixing their genetic material with human DNA. Their goal is to create biohybrids—part robot, part biological tissue—that can escape the torments of hell to go live in the golden sunlight of the mortal world. So far, they have not been entirely successful. It is now nighttime for the dysfunctional half-breeds imprisoned here. Let's try not to disturb their troubled sleep."

Werner's lights illuminate a creature sleeping on the floor inside the first cell. It's half hairless hyena, half Nosferatu. "*El Chupacabra*," Werner names it for me in a whisper. "The famous Goat-Sucker of South America."

He turns and shines his lights into the opposite cell. A ten-foot-tall bat-like creature with dirty white wings stands peering at us from behind the glass. Actually, it's not standing—it's levitating about two feet off the floor. Its luminous red eyes gleam like bicycle reflectors. Without moving, it buzzes at us in an oddly mechanical way as we go past it.

"That one is known as Mothman," Werner says in his doomy whisper. "It first appeared in our world around 1967, in

Point Pleasant, West Virginia. That was the time of the Silver Bridge collapse, when 46 people were killed. Like its Draconian progenitors, Mothman feeds on fear and suffering—or Loosh, as it's called down here.”

That buzzing noise is giving me the creeps. I start to walk a little faster to get away from it. I veer toward the next cell on the opposite side of the corridor and get the shit startled out of me when another weird creature hurls itself against the glass with a terrible shriek.

Werner trains his lights on the glass where the creature is repeatedly smashing its head, trying to get at me. It's an odd combination of vulture and Goth girl. It has a fierce beaked mouth, stubby parrot-green wings, and talons for hands. But it (she?) also has shapely naked breasts, large green eyes that appear to be streaked with mascara, and raven black hair in long, matted dreads.

“That one is an Utukku,” Werner tells me, his sonorous voice quavering just enough for me to notice. “It calls to mind the harpies of ancient lore. Such a base and hostile creature—a half-human bird, always in misery. I don't think it sings. It just screeches in pain, adding its voice to hell's harmony of overwhelming and collective murder.”

It's screeching all right—and clawing at the glass in a fingernails-on-a-blackboard way that raises the hair on my neck. I can't believe how hard the Utukku keeps banging its head against the glass. Blood starts flowing from its forehead, dripping and spattering everywhere. As I watch, the camera's lights slowly slide down the glass wall and come to rest, focused on the floor. I turn away from the frenzied Utukku to find Werner seated on the floor, passed out with his shoulders slumped against the glass of the opposite cell.

“Werner, are you okay?” I crouch and feel for a pulse in his neck. It's strong and steady.

Three baby-shaped creatures with sagging grey skin and large, unblinking black eyes emerge from the darkness behind

Werner. They crouch at the edge of their cell, observing us through the glass without making a sound.

A few seconds later, Werner opens his squinty blue eyes and says: “I must apologize. The sight of blood makes me faint. It is my Achilles’ heel.”

“How the hell can you stab goblins then?” I ask him.

“Goblin blood is green,” he answers. “It doesn’t bother me.”

I help Werner back up on his feet. He points to a lighted cell near the far end of the corridor. “Down there, that is what I wanted to show you,” he says as we walk toward the buttery glow. “It contains the missing link between my documentary about the 30,000-year-old paintings in Chauvet Cave and this new film, *The Harrowing of Hell*.”

The cell with the lights on is bigger than the others. Inside, I see a shaggy, nine-foot-tall creature covered in thick brown fur. It looks like a bear, or Bigfoot—or possibly Chewbacca, from the *Star Wars* franchise. I can’t see its face yet, because its back is turned to us. But what amazes me is that the creature, standing upright, is using a pointed charcoal stick to delicately trace the shape of a horse on the far limestone wall. In fact, there are two limestone walls within the cell—to the left and to the back—and both of them are covered with the most gorgeous cave drawings I’ve ever seen.

A pride of cave lions stalks a Minotaur. Wild horses gallop past a grazing herd of woolly mammoths. Two woolly rhinos trade blows with long, curving horns. Each scene is expertly outlined in black charcoal and then shaded in with more charcoal or smudges of powdered red hematite. The drawings are also etched back down in places to the original honey-white limestone with artful claw scrapings. It’s as if Pablo Picasso had turned into a werewolf.

“They call her *Grendlesmodor*,” Werner tells me, filming her at work through the glass. “Grendel’s mother, from *Beowulf*. Her artistry is impressive, don’t you agree?”

“I’m blown away by it...” I say.

“Although she was created here, in the lab—from a mixture of human, Draconian, and Paleolithic cave bear genes—her art almost perfectly replicates the paintings in Chauvet Cave. Which causes me to wonder if artistic ability is encoded within our DNA. And if so, then whose genes carried that innate artistry, along with archetypal image memories of Paleolithic creatures long thought to be extinct? Was it the human, the Draconian, or the cave bear?”

Grendlesmodor turns around then, charcoal stick in hand, as if she intends to answer Werner’s question herself. She has a wide aboriginal nose, full lips, and a heavy brow—like a 3-D computer-generated reconstruction of Neanderthal woman, only furrier. She’s sort of beautiful, in a way.

“Jeez, she’s like Beyoncé of the Yetis,” I say to Werner.

“Yes, she’s the most beguiling creature down here, by far,” Werner concurs. “I’ve been told she resembles the Yetis living in the wilds of the Moho in almost every detail. Some even believe she was captured from them and raised here in captivity, rather than grown from a test tube, as Jeb Beezos claims.”

“We should bust her out of there.”

“Now you sound like Timothy Treadwell,” Werner cautions me. Timothy Treadwell was the guy who got eaten by a bear in Werner’s documentary film *Grizzly Man*. “Timothy had a tragic misunderstanding of wild nature. He romanticized it and saw it as if the bears were all like in Walt Disney movies, friendly, fluffy creatures. Of course, they are ferocious and they ultimately kill you and eat you.”

“But she’s an artist,” I point out. “She deserves to be free.” Okay, so maybe I’m projecting a bit there. Still, she doesn’t strike me as dangerous.

“She’s a wild animal with a ravenous appetite,” Werner counters. “You would be no match for her if she decided to have you for a midnight snack.”

Can Grendlesmodor understand what I’m saying? It seems that she can. She locks eyes with me and walks over to the glass.

She puts her palm flat against it, in the classic prison visitation gesture. I put my own palm up to meet hers. The look on her face conveys genuine kindness, and maybe even something approaching a deep human-yeti bond.

“Don’t be fooled by her,” Werner says to me. “The common character of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder.”

“I respectfully disagree.”

“We should go now. Gülru is waiting.”

“Yeah, okay. Just let me say goodbye first.”

Werner goes to the end of the corridor and opens a door that leads to a well-lighted laboratory. He stands there holding the door open for me while I say goodbye to Grendlesmodor. Her eyes linger on mine—compassionate, tear-clouded—and then she turns away, as if she’s disappointed that I’m leaving.

I feel like a shit, bailing on her like that. But then I get an inspiration. After making sure that Werner isn’t watching, I unholster my raygun and fire at the electronic lock on the cell’s door. There’s a burst of pink laser light. The lock clicks and spits sparks. I grab the door’s handle and swing it open. Then I put a finger to my lips, give Grendlesmodor a wink, and head on my way.

I understand the romantic impulse there, Captain Charisma, Gülru says between my ears, but you’re taking an enormous risk. You don’t know that Yeti.

“She’s a great artist,” I say. “I’ll take that risk.” If I get my head torn off in a biohybrid Bigfoot ambush, it’ll be my own damn fault, but I just don’t see that happening. It’s an intuitive thing: I trust Grendlesmodor in the same way I trusted Garmr.

I catch up to Werner and close the door behind us, but not all the way. We walk through the lab, past computer terminals, microscopes, genome sequencers, and long white tables laden with Petri dishes and racks of Pyrex test tubes. All the while, I keep an eye on the door to see if Grendlesmodor is going to follow us. The door doesn’t budge. Either Grendlesmodor is

resigned to life inside her glassed-in pseudo-cave, or she's waiting for Werner and me to get some distance on her before she makes a run for it.

"Nice lab," I say to Werner. "How come no one works here?" The place is deserted.

"It's a Saturday night," he tells me. "Aside from me and my crew, only goblins work weekends—and they're not permitted inside the genomics lab, ever."

We arrive at a garbage chute built into the lab's back wall. Werner lifts up a hinged flap—about a meter square, with a red medical waste symbol on it—and he says, "Here is our exit. It goes straight to the basement. We'll be able to leave unnoticed by security cameras."

"A laboratory waste chute? Wouldn't that be routed straight into an incinerator?"

"I don't think the incinerator incinerates on weekends."

"You *don't think* the incinerator incinerates. Great. And if we're lucky enough that it doesn't, how are we supposed to get out of it?"

Werner points to the red-handled bolt cutters I'm carrying. "We'll use those," he says.

"I see you've really put a lot of thought into this." I try to remember if there were ever any fatalities on Werner's film sets. All I can recall is a story about filming *Fitzcarraldo* on location in the jungles of Peru: one crew member was bitten by a snake whose venom swiftly induces cardiac arrest, so he cut off his own foot with a chainsaw to save himself. I decide to proceed with caution. "You go first," I say.

"No," Werner replies, "I must stay here with the camera to get the shot of you going down the chute. You can call up to me when you're safely out of the way and then I will follow."

"Oh what the hell...." With a heavy sigh, I climb into the chute while Werner films me. "I'll do this for you, but I want to go on record saying that I think it's a really bad idea." I get

turned around, resting on my back with the bolt cutters held in my left hand and the Maglite flashlight strapped under the belt of my raygun holster, pointed so that it illuminates the chute beneath my feet. Then I let go.

The incline of the waste chute starts out at about the same angle as a steel slide in a playground, but it soon drops to a near-vertical pitch. I try to slow myself down by pushing my feet against the sides of the chute, but they're too slick to provide much friction and gravity is working its usual wonders. I begin to plummet.

I'm like a luge racer out of control. I'm moving so fast that even if the incinerator isn't working, the fall will probably kill me. I jam the black rubber grips on the bolt cutter handles between my legs, trying to get more friction against the bottom of the chute. That doesn't work, but as the handles bump back up into my hands and spread, I get an idea. I lean back and open the handles wide above my head, pressing their rubber grips against opposite sides of the chute. They catch, extend, and suddenly twin dents appear in the sides of the chute. The bolt cutters twang, suspended between the dents like a crooked chin-up bar with me dangling from them, no longer hurtling.

The rapid deceleration sends my flashlight tumbling from the raygun holster. About six feet below me, it gets vaporized in a sudden crossfire of green lasers at the chute's terminus.

Apparently, Blue Orgazon is right on the cutting edge of smokeless waste incineration technology.

"Hey, Werner!" I yell up at him in the ensuing darkness. "Don't come down this way. It's not safe."

"Okay! Then I will take the stairs!" Werner shouts down at me through the chute.

"Wait! There's a fucking stairway? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought going down the garbage chute would look more dramatic for our film."

"You fucker! I almost died!"

“But you did not. I will meet you in the basement.” I hear him closing the flap at the top of the waste chute.

What the hell do I do now?

“Hey, um, Gülru?” I ask, still dangling. “Any suggestions on how I might get out of here?”

Do you still have your raygun? she asks me.

I feel for it. “Yeah, it’s in the holster,” I tell her.

There’s a tiny button in front of the trigger guard on the left hand side, like a safety. Point the gun away from you and push it.

I do as she says. “Okay,” I tell her.

Now you can use the raygun to cut through metal like a torch. Go for it.

It takes me a while, because the seams keep re-welding themselves shut from the laser’s heat (unlike in the movies, using a real raygun to cut through metal can be a frustrating endeavor), but I eventually manage to carve out a trapdoor in the chute that’s big enough for me to slip through. After a few solid kicks, it peels away from the interior like the pull-tab lid on a sardine can and I drop through it.

It turns out that I was dangling about fifteen feet above the basement floor. Luckily, I land on a pile of garbage bags full of aluminum cans, so I don’t break any bones in the fall. (Even in hell, recycling appears to be a priority.) Werner is there, capturing the whole sorry scene on his 3-D camera. I give him the finger as I climb to my feet.

“You forgot the bolt cutters,” he tells me.

“Oh shit,” I say. “Do we really need them?”

“Yes. Fortunately, there’s a ladder.”

He’s not lying. An aluminum extension ladder is leaned up against the wall to the right of the incinerator. I also see a couple of candy apple red Snap-On tool storage lockers. I go over to them and start rummaging through the drawers until I find what

I'm looking for: another pair of bolt cutters, similar to the ones I left pegged in the chute.

"Will these do?" I ask Werner.

"Yes, okay. Now we must flee before the superintendent returns and asks why we cut a hole in his garbage chute."

The basement has three grimy firehouse-sized garage doors. To their left is a rusty brown door with an exit sign above it. We head for that. The door opens onto a sheltered concrete ramp leading outside. (Although can you really call it outside when you're still inside a vast underground cavern?) Once we get to the top of the ramp, we find that Blue Orgazon butts up against the Moho equivalent of a public park. Clearly delineated gravel pathways wind through a veritable forest of weirdly shaped stalagmites, like some Zen garden of the underworld.

Werner seems to know where he's going. He follows a path toward the center of the stalagmite field. Along the way, we pass a few goblin couples out for a stroll, but they pay no more attention to us than we'd get in a park aboveground. Behind us, the Blue Orgazon building looms—twenty-three asymmetrical curved floors stacked up the side of a sheer basalt cliff like a cubist wedding cake and painted a dark iridescent blue. Ahead of us, rising above everything else, we see an enormous marble statue of Saturn devouring his son. It looks like that famous Goya painting of the same hideous scene. A fitting icon for the Archons, if you ask me.

We arrive at the edge of a circular pit. Only it's more than a pit, I see now. Along the pit's sides a limestone ramp descends in a long, continuous spiral into the open earth, like the ramp gallery designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the interior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Werner leads me down that ramp. We circle lower and lower, past strange totemic artifacts of the underworld: big-titted Venus figurines, ivory dildos, shit-stained sarcophagi, horrific tribal masks, pastel-tinted predator skulls with gold leaf fangs, black velvet paintings of gnomes playing poker—just about

anything imaginable, really. Matthew Barney's frozen Vaseline sculptures wouldn't look out of place.

About midway down the ramp, we peer out at the top of a massive terracotta sculpture rising from the bottom of the pit. It depicts a piled up orgy of sleek weasels with human faces, each weasel about the size of a Buick. Fluffy weasel tails entwine with heaving weasel torsos, tiny weasel feet climb on hunching weasel shoulders, and straining weasel erections disappear into receptive weasel vulvas. The faces on the weasels are famous: George W. Bush, Taylor Swift, Donald Trump, Anna Wintour, Goose Bender, Lena Dunham, Bill Cosby, Rihanna, Chris Brown, Ray J, Limn Lardassian—and at the very top of the heap, Conye Best.

"Conye again!" I gripe to Werner. "I can't get away from that guy, even in hell."

"Which one is Conye?" he asks.

"He's the top weasel with the big nutsack who stole my girlfriend."

"Aha!" Werner exclaims, pointing his camera.

Can you guys quit gawking and hurry up? Gülru says from within my head.

Down the ramp we go, all the way to the bottom. When we get there, we find ourselves inside a ring of black basalt with caves leading off in all directions.

"Which cave is yours?" I ask Gülru.

The one straight across from where you're looking, she answers.

I walk in that direction.

No... that one leads to the public restrooms. Move over one... more toward your left.

I head into the cave on the left. Werner follows with the lights from his 3-D camera illuminating the way.

"Derek! Werner! Can you hear me?" It's Gülru's voice, both inside my head and now outside it, tickling my eardrums.

I run to her—

—and pull up short.

The scene in front of me is not what I was expecting. Gülru is seated on a primitive throne in an alcove with white plaster walls. The throne must function as a nanogel Sybian, because I hear the same air-sucking electronic whirring noise that I heard earlier in my brother's old Queen Anne apartment; also, the same flexible black tubes are attached to Gülru's nipples and navel. What's new is a fourth and larger hose vacuum-clamped to Gülru's exposed backside. It appears to be sucking hungrily at her anus. She also has solid gold shackles on her ankles. The golden chain between those shackles runs through a thick iron loop embedded in the floor, making her a prisoner.

Several dwarfs with hideous cobalt blue simian faces are attending to Gülru. You know those flying blue monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*? These guys look like that, only they don't have wings and their skin is crawling with weird blue fireflies. But just like those asshole Oz monkeys, they bounce and leap about and their feet don't always seem to be touching the ground. Weirder still, the acrobatic blue dwarfs are in charge of an endless procession of levitating dead human corpses that pass through the alcove like they're on an invisible assembly line.

The corpses look like they're fresh from whatever killed them: car crash, hanging, heart attack, cancer, knife fight, crocodile mauling, shotgun blast beneath the chin, whatever.... As each corpse floats past the throne, a dwarf reaches between its legs and scrapes out the death shit—the final turd—released as the body is dying. Some shits are hard and phallic, others wet and runny. In each case, the dwarfs carry the shit in their cupped hands over to Gülru and present it to her like they're handing over a Fabergé egg. She leans forward, sniffs it, and then takes a tiny nibble. Her lips and nose are stained brown from the constant stream of excrement.

I'm so fucking grossed out that I don't know what to say. I shout, "Gülru, what the hell?" But she just shrugs.

"Gülru is a sin eater," Werner explains, coming up behind me with his camera running, recording everything. "She devours

the transgressions of the dead so they can achieve transcendence. Each of us is born between piss and shit, trapped in a body that eats life and generates filth. To exist is to be stained. Human beings can never be free of the evil they visit upon others in this world because Yaldabaoth's flawed creation is an oppressive machine that runs on pain and decay. We escape our perpetual state of debasement only in death, with the sin eaters' help."

"It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it," Gülru quips through a mouthful of shit.

"So should I cut you loose, or would you rather stay here eating shit all day?" I ask her with a wave of my bolt cutters.

"Oh, for sure, get me out of here," Gülru says. "I'm sick of this shit. Jeb Beezos can find someone else to do his dirty work."

I take two steps toward Gülru and the blue dwarfs suddenly gang up on me, wielding Swiss Army knives. They look tiny, but menacing.

"Oh yeah... the Kobolds," Gülru says, slapping her forehead. "They're here to make sure I do my job. They won't let me leave without a fight."

Werner adds: "The Kobolds are liminal creatures, midway between this world and the next. So put down your bolt cutters and draw your swords, Derek. The iron in the meteorite blades will disrupt their quantum entangled photons."

I do what Werner says as the blue dwarfs charge me. They're scrappy little fuckers. They move so fast that I have a hard time laying any meteorite metal on them. But each time I do, a dwarf disappears in a flash of cobalt blue vapor. As I start to get the hang of the katana swords, I take out the remaining dwarfs with some wild-assed samurai moves I learned from watching Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill, Volumes 1 and 2*.

"No more Kobolds," I observe. I pick up the bolt cutters and stride on over to free Gülru with my chest puffed out.

"My hero!" She flicks off the tubes from her nipples and navel and stands up to hug me. When she goes in for a kiss, I instinctively turn my lips aside.

“You’ve got some, uh....” I point to my own lips, as if I, too, might have recently snacked on someone’s death-diarrhea.

“Right. I forgot,” she says. She zips up her exoskeleton suit, suddenly acting shy. “Did either of you guys happen to bring a toothbrush? Or mouthwash?”

I just shrug. The big vacuum hose behind Gülru makes a rippling fart-sucking sound when she yanks it out of her ass. She cringes.

“Okay, now that was embarrassing...” she says.

While I get busy with the bolt cutters, Werner passes her a linen handkerchief and a silver flask. “For you, my dear,” he says with Bavarian *savoir-faire*.

Gülru rinses out her mouth with whisky and spit. Then she wipes off her nose and mouth. When she tries to return the soiled hanky to Werner, he waves it away, saying, “Yours to keep.”

“The flask?” Gülru asks, extending it toward him.

“Likewise.”

Gülru downs the rest of the whiskey and tosses the empty flask over her shoulder, along with the handkerchief. “Okay, time to click our ruby red heels together and get back to Seattle,” she says. “You guys with me?”

“Let’s go,” I say.

“We might have some trouble with goblins along the way,” she warns us.

“Fuck ‘em,” says Werner.

Gülru explains that we won’t be able to use the elevator that leads back to Jeb Beezos’ *dohyo*, for obvious reasons, but there’s a second elevator that the goblins have been using to kidnap runaway teens from the Seattle Center. That one should do—if we can get to it. The trouble is that it’s in the dead center of Emerald City, Moho—the goblin capital of the Paleo-Pacific Northwest.

Corporations like Glamazon have treaties in place with the denizens of the Moho that allow corporate executives to travel between the two worlds without harassment. But outside of a corporate environment, all bets are off. Subterranean tourism is discouraged. Goblins have a nasty habit of raping and eating stray humans, just for the hell of it.

“So, basically, to goblins we’re just food and something to fuck,” I interpret as we walk through an upward angled tunnel toward the city.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Gülru says. “Hey, would you mind loaning me a sword? You don’t need two, do you?”

“Sure.” I pass her a sword. “Do you want the raygun, too? You’re probably a better shot than I am.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d prefer the raygun,” Werner pipes up. “Swords can be a bit unwieldy with all this camera gear attached to me.”

Makes sense. I hook up Werner with the raygun and he hands over his swords, so Gülru and I both have two. Now we’re ready to go kick some serious goblin ass.

Werner strides ahead of us and turns around so he can get some slo-mo footage of me and Gülru walking out of the tunnel into the city like we’re in a Tarantino movie. “Between the Eyes” by Love Battery—one of Seattle’s original grunge bands—starts playing through our bone phones. Gülru must have wireless access to her iTunes account down here.

It doesn’t take long for the first goblins to show up. As we’re walking past a stone-and-glass Dairy Queen franchise, two burly red-skinned goblins eating ice cream cones drop off the low wall they were sitting on and saunter over to taunt us. One of them spits a gob of ice cream in Gülru’s face. She casually raises a sword to wipe her cheek with the back of her hand. Then, with a fierce ninja shout, she twirls and lops off the heads of both goblins before they even know what hit them. Green gore spurts in twin fountains from their severed necks as the goblins’ bodies

fall to their knees in front of Gülru like worshippers in Queen Ereskigal's temple.

"There's no use playing nice with these fuckwits," Guru says, stepping past their still-blinking bat-snouted heads.

A crowd of seven goblins has gathered on the sidewalk ahead of us, clicking and grunting to each other while keeping their eyes focused in our direction. There's no telling if they're going to attack or let us pass.

They let us pass. More red-skinned goblins swarm into the street ahead as the goblins from the sidewalk spread out behind us. We're surrounded now by, I'm guessing, thirty or forty goblins in total. I know I should be scared, but I'm too distracted by my immediate surroundings to feel much anxiety about what's coming. On the next block ahead of us I'm seeing Moho versions of McDonald's, Starbucks, and a KFC advertising "Human Thigh Strips for \$2.99." I'm wondering how the Colonel's Original Secret Recipe tastes in hell.

On some unseen signal, the goblins in the foreground decide to charge us, running down the street like red-faced berserkers.

"Watch your flanks!" Werner says as he turns around and fires the raygun in a wide semi-circle behind us. The laser sets fire to each and every goblin it strikes. Soon all seven are lit up like Tiki torches.

Werner turns back around waving the raygun as if to cool it off. He says to us in a somewhat surprised tone: "I thought this raygun could only stun."

"I had Derek switch it to Burn mode in the garbage chute," Gülru explains as she sidesteps, crouches, and swipes her katana blade across the belly of the first—and fastest—sprinting goblin. The goblin slices neatly in two. The lower half keeps running while the upper half hits the ground like a sack of mulch.

Another goblin hurtles toward me, baring its fangs. I don't have the forethought to sidestep, like Gülru, so I just stab it straight in its fucking heart. The dead goblin falls onto its back, but my katana sword goes with it, stuck in the creature's

sternum. I have to put my foot against its ribs and wriggle the sword back and forth before I can pry it out. It teaches me an important lesson: No stabbing. Just slice and dice.

Werner raises his raygun across my shoulder and incinerates the face of a hard-charging monstrosity that looks bigger than the others. Or at least it did while it still had a head.

The goblins arrive en masse at that point. We're beset by demons. Guru twirls like a ropedancer, slicing off arms and legs with balletic abandon. Me, I feel clunkier, but I'm getting the job done. Hacking at bearded throats seems to work well.

I honestly don't understand why the goblins are throwing themselves at us without weapons. Oh sure, a few of them have garbage can lids or lengths of pipe to use as clubs, but not one of them has a sword or a spear or a gun. Even though they outnumber us by at least ten to one, we seem to be evenly matched. Maybe the plan is to wear us down with their sheer numbers and velocity.

"This site is starting look like what you'd see after Gaiseric laid siege to Rome," Werner says, filming everything.

He's right. I feel like a goddam barbarian. There's so much green goblin blood pooling at our feet that it's starting to get slippery. Yet another goblin staggers past us with its head on fire. Werner is quite the marksman, even with one eye always looking through the lens of his camera.

I slice a few more throats, take off an arm or two at the elbow, but my heart's not in it. It feels wrong to be playing cowboys and Indians down here in the Moho—especially since it looks like I'm stuck in the role of the cowboy. I read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* at a young age and it made a big impression; I was always on the side of the Indians when I was growing up.

More goblins pour into the streets. I even see some white-faced lady goblins among them, viciously gnashing their teeth. We're wildly outnumbered. It's only a matter of time before Gülru and I get too tired to raise our swords. And then what?

How will it feel to get eaten alive? Not pleasant, I'm guessing.

Behind me, I hear a strangely beautiful sound that falls somewhere between a lion's roar and an elephant seal's belch. All of the goblins suddenly stop what they're doing and look down the street. After making sure that no goblin is near enough to tackle me, I also turn and have a look.

Big, shaggy Grendlesmodor is stomping up the street, bellowing with great confidence and verve. I've never been so happy to see a Yeti in all my life.

"Grendlesmodor!" I shout. "You made it!"

I walk over to shake her big, black, callused hand. She surprises me by encircling me with her hairy arms and lifting me up into a warm, smelly Bigfoot hug. For a split-second I worry that she's going to crush the life out of me, or chew my face off. Instead, she covers my cheeks with slobbery kisses. Then she sets me back on my feet and everything's fine. It's obvious we're pals.

That freaks the goblins right out. They collectively turn and skulk away. In less than a minute, the streets are empty.

I take Grendlesmodor's enormous hand in mine and lead her over to say hello to Werner and Gülru.

"See? I told you artists should be free," I exult, slip-sliding on goblin blood. The big Yeti steadies me with her hand.

"Grendlesmodor, we meet again," Werner says with a bow. "I'm very pleased you could join us."

"Goblins are incredibly superstitious about Yetis," Gülru explains to me. "They think it's bad luck to even be seen by one. Same with Garmr. We should be able to walk straight through the city now without getting hassled."

Grendlesmodor tugs on my hand as if she understands every word and wants to lead the way. So off we go.

The retail district of Emerald City turns out to be just about like anywhere else in America—not all that different from downtown Detroit or the seedier parts of Paterson, New Jersey. Beneath the prevalent green paint, most of the strip malls and

office towers are made of stone or concrete (the most readily accessible building materials in the Moho), but the construction, for the most part, looks shoddy and unimaginative. Cinder block shacks predominate. Burger wrappers, cigarette butts, and broken 40-ounce bottles of St. Ides Malt Liquor litter the sidewalks. Cheap plastic crap and garish vinyl display banners clutter the windows. When you get past the emerald green Aztec-Flintstones theme, hell appears to be every bit as mired in the ugliness of quick-buck capitalism as the surface world.

I don't know why that surprises me. It shouldn't.

We pass a Taco Bell, a Wendy's, a 7-Eleven, and several strip clubs with names like Dick Everhard's Boobie Trap, Pink Öyster Cult, Areola 51, Leave It To Beavers, and The Wizard of Cooze. The goblins might not speak English, but apparently they can read it—and goblin nude entertainment purveyors seem to like raunchy puns. Either that or, like most everything else, the strip clubs are owned by transnational corporations from above. Gülru mentions that the strip clubs are staffed with human slaves, so maybe they're a lucrative new growth industry being tapped by the for-profit prison operators.

"Can we take some of those stripper girls with us?" I ask Gülru as we pass the blacked-out windows of the aforementioned Areola 51. "Free some slaves on our way out?"

"I don't see why not," she says, patting Grendlesmodor's hairy arm.

The strip club's goblin patrons scream and hide under their cocktail tables like whiny little bitches when Grendlesmodor busts through Areola 51's front door. The tattooed strippers run and hide, too, but when Gülru grabs the microphone in the DJ booth and announces that anyone wanting a free trip back up to Seattle can come with us, the girls return in their rhinestone panties and ripped fishnet stockings to accept our offer. We end up with nine new, mostly nude, nubile travel partners.

On the way out the door, Werner zaps his raygun at the mirror ball twirling at the center of the ceiling. The tiny mirror

facets scatter the laser beam in multiple directions, setting the whole place on fire.

“That was fun! Let’s go liberate more strippers,” I suggest, pointing my katana blade at Pink Öyster Cult across the street.

“The elevator can’t handle more than a dozen people at a time,” Gülru tells me. “Let’s just stick with this bunch for now.”

Introductions are made all around as we walk along the street, unmolested. I meet Candy and Tiffany and Penny and Lilly and Coco and Maximum Jane (the last a plus-sized stripper; “Goblins like fatties,” Maximum Jane explains, at peace with her endomorphic image). I also meet Bambi, Fantasia, and Perdita (the Disney contingent; “I’m named after Pongo’s wife in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*,” Perdita avers, topless). Soon, we’re all chatting away like new best friends. Pam would be proud.

When we finally arrive at the elevator, I have to say goodbye to Grendlesmorder. The surface world just isn’t ready for her—we both know that. Still, I feel incredibly sad that she can’t go along with us. Grendlesmodor seems to share my sentiments. After we exchange a last, lingering hug, she lets out a plaintive roar as I step inside the elevator—sort of like Chewbacca at his most frustrated, only girlier.

She’s a whole lot of Wookiee, that Grendlesmodor. I’ll never forget her fuzzy, loving face.

Gülru says the trip to the surface will take a several hours because we have to decompress along the way. I pass a lot of that time talking to Werner about movies and books. When he finds out I’ve written a few books of my own, he says something so precise and simply right that it will always stick with me:

“Consuming the Internet, TV, and even cinema makes you lose the world. Only by reading can you gain the world.”

Amen to that, Werner Herzog, I say to myself.



ROOM 502

The solid book we wrote cannot be found today.

—David Bowie, “The Bewlay Brothers”

FUTURE TENSE

Yaldabaoth, in the guise of Lloyd Marrsden, is waiting for us when we step out of the elevator at the top of the Space Needle.

“Who’s ready for lunch? I’m buying!” he shouts, waving to us from his table overlooking the Seattle skyline.

The rotating restaurant with the 360-degree panorama is called SkyCity. They don’t have a strict dress code, but nine topless women wearing only crotchless spangled panties, garter belts, underworld slut stockings, and see-through acrylic Cinderella pumps would probably violate the dress code even in a South Beach Pizza Hut. An unctuous waiter in a white tuxedo comes over to inform our group that we aren’t welcome on SkyCity’s Republican-owned premises. Perhaps we’d like to continue upward to the observation deck, he suggests. But then Lloyd waddles over bearing an armload of shimmery shantung dresses. There’s even a shantung muumuu for Maximum Jane that’s been custom-sewn (perhaps by Lloyd’s bespoke tailor, Omar the Tentmaker). Lloyd slips the waiter a Benjamin and the liberated strippers slip into their new dresses.

Problem solved. The question is: *How did he know?*

“Werner, have you met Yal—?” I start to say.

“Lloyd Marrsden,” Lloyd/Yaldabaoth says, extending his fat-fingered hand. “I’m a huge fan of your work.”

Werner shoots me a quick, knowing glance as he shakes Lloyd's hand and exchanges pleasantries. On the long ride up in the elevator, we'd compared notes on hell and I'd told him about my encounter with Yaldabaoth. Much to his regret, Werner had been denied access to that shape-shifting, diabolical demigod. "When making a documentary about hell," he'd said to me, "it is imperative to get an interview with the highest-ranking devil." So I wonder how he'll play this.

"You can set down your camera, Werner," Lloyd says to him. "Everything I'm about to tell you has to be off the record."

"Are you sure?" Werner asks. "You could use our documentary as a platform to tell your side of the story."

"I already have some ideas about that. Camera off, please."

The Bewlay Brothers appear behind us and help Werner remove his camera gear and the Steadicam vest. They also take his raygun.

"No swords in the restaurant," says Lloyd. "Derek, Gülru... that means you. You have my assurance that Colin and Iggy will make no attempts to harm you."

I reluctantly take off my vest and hand it to Colin (or maybe Iggy) with the swords still in their scabbards. I kind of hate to see them go. They served me well.

The thought crosses my mind that I could have used the swords to behead the Bewlay Brothers at that moment, but an unprovoked dual beheading in a crowded restaurant might appear gauche. Besides, I'm not sensing a threat from them. Gülru is complying without exhibiting any fear or hesitation—and I'm convinced that she, of all people, would know if we were in trouble.

"Now let's all sit down and eat!" Lloyd says with a clap of his hands. "After such a long trip, you all must be starving."

Hunger was certainly an issue on the slow ride to the surface, but the lack of a bathroom in the elevator had been the more serious problem. Some of the strippers couldn't hold out for the

duration and they ended up peeing on the floor. Now more than half of them have excused themselves to go use the restrooms.

As we take our seats at Lloyd's table, he says, "That was unexpected—your emancipation of the goblins' doxies. We'll have to dose them with Nepenthe before we set them loose up here."

"What's Nepenthe?" I ask him. "You're not talking about the restaurant in Big Sur, I take it."

"No. It's an ancient potion that erases memories—*nepenthes pharmakon*—the anti-sorrow drug. Up here, you have a less potent drug called propranolol that can achieve similar results when it's used in conjunction with xenon gas."

"Hey, you can't just wipe out our memories," Perdita objects. "I don't want to have to learn English and math all over again. Math bored me enough the first time."

"I only mean to wipe out your memories of hell, dear," Lloyd explains to her, "which should be no great loss. As I understand it, your experiences down below were far from pleasant."

"Yeah, you try jacking off goblins all day and see how much you like it," Perdita says.

"At least you didn't have to do their taxes," I joke with her.

"Did you guys know their jizz glows in the dark?" Maximum Jane asks us. "And every one of them shoots off like Peter North. It's beyond disgusting."

"So you won't object if those particular memories are taken from you?" Lloyd asks the group, solicitous.

"No, that's fine. You can have 'em," says Perdita, speaking for all of them.

"Good!" Lloyd says. "Then I won't have to send you back."

"You'd send us back to hell? Really?" Maximum Jane asks with a plaintive whine catching in the back of her throat.

"If you didn't submit to memory erasure, you'd leave me no choice," Lloyd answers.

“And who the hell are you, anyway?” Perdita asks him.

Werner leans over next to Perdita and confides, “He’s the Prince of Darkness. He has a considerable latitude.”

Maximum Jane picks up a knife and a fork and arranges the silver implements into an impromptu cross. “Back off, Satan!” she says, waving it in Lloyd’s face from across the table.

Lloyd’s squinty eyes twinkle. “I’m not that kind of devil,” he tells her. He lays a fat finger on Maximum Jane’s holy silverware and gently pushes it back onto the tabletop.

“I assume, then, that our original agreement is still in place?” Werner asks Lloyd.

“I see no reason to amend it,” he answers.

Werner looks around the table and says, “I’ll be joining you young ladies for the Nepenthe procedure. I consented to have my memory erased when I finished filming my documentary of the Moho. False memories will be implanted that will lead me to believe I’ve shot a science fiction film. It was a stipulation of my contract; without it, the documentary could not have proceeded.”

“Can they really do that?” I ask Werner. “Make you think you did things that you didn’t really do?”

“They can and they will. MKULTRA has come a long way since the fifties.”

“What about me?” I ask Lloyd. “I didn’t sign up to have my memories erased.”

“Yours is a special case,” Lloyd says, leaning back to get comfortable as two waiters arrive at our table and begin setting down silver platters arranged with oysters on the half shell on beds of chipped ice. “At first,” Lloyd continues, “I thought Nepenthe was the only option, but then I reconsidered after our encounter in the cave, while I was pretending to be Gülru.”

Gülru starts sniggering. I feel a sudden heat flush through my cheeks.

“What happened in the cave?” Werner asks me.

“He took a bite out of the proverbial apple,” Lloyd answers for me.

“A big ol’ *juicy* bite...” Gülru elaborates, barely containing her mirth.

“Think of the Apple logo, that stylized icon on Steve Jobs’ computers,” Lloyd says, addressing the entire table. “The apple with a bite taken out of it, symbol of knowledge and lust. That’s what hell provides: knowledge and lust. People go to hell because they like it. They aren’t sent there for sinning. They buy their own ticket and take the ride. Usually, that ticket is only one-way. But in Derek’s case, I think it will be fun to let him go free, just to see how he tells our side of the story.”

“Seriously? You want me to tell people about hell?”

“Without hard evidence, no one will believe a word that you write.”

“I could cite Werner’s film as evidence.”

“I wouldn’t advise it. Werner will be telling everyone that the goblins and all the other underworld spectacles were created at Weta Digital by Peter Jackson’s visual effects team in New Zealand. Peter has already agreed to lie for us.”

“I’m sorry, Derek,” says Werner. “I have no choice. I must adhere to my contract or my film will be destroyed.”

I look deep into Lloyd’s eyes, searching for the presence of Yaldabaoth behind them. “So am I hearing this right?” I ask him. “You’re saying it’s okay for me to finish writing *The Book of Beezos* now?”

“I would suggest you find a better title,” Lloyd says, “but *Yes*, go ahead, finish the book—or start a new one—it no longer matters to me. You’re burdened with knowing *too much* now. Whatever you choose to write about from here on will be too fantastical for the average person to believe.”

“What about Jeb Beezos? Is he okay with that?”

“He’ll survive. Jeb has larger concerns—like playing an alien overlord in JJ Abrams’ next *Star Trek* movie.”

“Wait—there’s a new *Star Trek* movie?” Maximum Jane asks.

Lloyd ignores her. “By this time next year, Jeb Bezos will be the world’s third-richest man. And he’ll pass Bill Gates to become Numero Uno before 2020. Your obscure satires can’t hurt him. In fact, he might even enjoy seeing himself reflected in the funhouse mirror of your fiction.”

“And what about Pam?” I ask.

“Pam is Room 502. I think you know where that is...” says Lloyd. “One word of caution: She’s already been dosed with Nepenthe. She’ll never be able to recall what she did after she got into that taxi with Conye on the night she disappeared.”

“So her memory’s just a blank?”

Lloyd nods. “The interval between now and then will forever be missing time for her. You’ll both have to find a way to live with that—without ever knowing what happened. Was she kidnapped? Did she vanish on purpose? Did she have an affair with Conye to become famous, or to further her career? You’ll never know.”

“But look on the bright side...” Gülru interjects, “you’ll never have to tell her what you were up to in hell.”

“But *you* know what happened to Pam,” I say to Lloyd.

“Do I? And would you believe me if I told you? If I described your girlfriend’s toe-clenching orgasms with Conye in elaborate detail, would that information help you in any way?”

My stomach squirms. “Uh, no, I guess not...” I manage to say through the sour bile rising in my throat.

“If you two can’t learn to live with the mystery, the lingering doubts will destroy whatever you had together. But that might not be such a bad thing.” Lloyd pauses to slide an oyster down his walruslike gullet. After a muted belch, he continues: “You’ll be much more productive, as a Herald, if you’re not distracted by a spouse or a lover. You’ll end up having a much greater impact on the world. Bad news for me and my Dark Brotherhood, perhaps, but not so much fun for you, either.”

“And if we stay together?”

“The outlook is hazy, as the Magic 8-Ball likes to say. In one future scenario I’ve glimpsed, you both die in a car crash on the day after your wedding. I’m not rooting for that particular outcome because it would send your books, and Pam’s videos, on a trajectory toward their maximum impact. Dying so young and in love, you’d both become art world icons. I’d rather not see that happen.”

“I’m not so hot on that one, either,” I say.

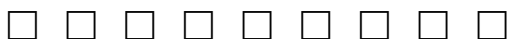
“Much more likely,” says Lloyd, “you’ll stay together and start to wear on each other. The pettiness of the everyday will creep into your relationship: Boring jobs, ruinous tax hikes, health insurance and mortgage payments. Your interests will diverge. Inevitably, one or both of you will start to feel alone in the other’s presence, more tolerated than loved. The forces of ruination will have their way with you then, as they do with everyone who lives long enough. Breasts will sag, hair will thin, unforeseen illnesses will ravage your physiques. Sickness, old age, and death—there’s no escape. If you’re lucky, you won’t have to make adjustments for cancer treatments, hip replacements, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, or colostomy bags. Of course, there will be some bright spots along the way. Over the years, maybe you’ll get to travel, maybe you’ll have children... but you’ll never achieve the same level of influence, as creative artists, that you would have had apart.”

“Does everyone’s future have to be so fucking bleak just so you can feel better about yourself?” I ask Lloyd.

“Everyone’s body is on loan in this world of mine,” Lloyd says, slurping another oyster. I can hear it squelching around inside his fat greedy mouth as he chews. “The interest due on the loan is grief. As you’ve said yourself, Derek, I’m in the business of harvesting Loosh—and business has never been better.”

“Well, screw that...” I say, standing up from the table. “I’m going to find Pam. And when I do, I plan to love her forever—even if it pisses you off.”

Lloyd blithely waves me away, as if he'd anticipated my departure. "Fine. Go retrieve your better half: Am From I Am. The Bewlay Brothers will escort you back to your brother's old apartment. You'll have to change out of your exoskeleton suit and hand it over. Then you're on your own. Good luck!"



"You guys want a beer?" I ask Iggy and Colin once we get inside my brother's old apartment. Bob Sasso was nice enough to stock the fridge in the unfinished kitchen with two six-packs of Bud Light. Not the greatest beer in the world, but it'll do.

"Sure, I'll have a beer," says Iggy (or Colin). The other one says he'll have one, too.

Now that I've had my first chance to look at them without a gun being pointed at me, I realize that the Bewlay Brothers are much older than I'd originally thought.

"So how long have you guys been working for Yaldabaoth?" I ask, passing the bottles around. I think there's a 50-50 chance the Bewlay Brothers have come here to kill me. If that turns out to be the case, I'm hoping the small talk will persuade them to make a quick job of it, rather than torturing me for hours first.

"You should go change out of that exoskeleton suit," Colin (or Iggy) tells me, pointing toward the bedrooms with his beer bottle and ignoring my question.

I guess they're not that big on small talk. I try again: "Any chance I could get my swords back? I kind of liked those."

"The swords belong to Werner. You'll have to ask him."

"Yaldabaoth told us you could keep the VR glasses, though. They'll be on the market next month."

"Cool!" I go off to the bedroom and change into a pair of faded jeans and a white linen shirt. I decide to leave my VR goggles on. The Bewlay Brothers are still wearing theirs and I don't want my eyes to give anything away.

When I return, Iggy and Colin are still right where I left them. Their beer bottles have been drained, but that's the only difference. I trade the folded exoskeleton suit for their empties.

"Another round?" I ask them.

"We should get going," one of them says.

"Sorry about shooting you in the ass," says the other. "That was all Jeb. Yaldabaoth seems to like you."

"Jeb's kind of a dick," I say.

"Kind of?"

"He's a complete dick. Money does that to people."

The Bewlay Brothers smirk and head out the door.

I lock the door behind them with a dizzying sense of relief. I'm feeling faint. I haven't had anything to eat or drink for days—aside from two liters of Brewskizon Porter and a spritz of shape-shifter pussy juice. I wander into the living room and flop down on my back in the middle of the carpet. I tell myself I'll just rest my eyes for a while and then I'll drive to Tacoma to find Pam. *Maybe I should stop at a Wendy's along the way....*

I wake up in the dark some unknown number of hours later, wondering what the hell just happened.



My first thought is that the Bewlay Brothers must have spiked my beer with Nepenthe. But then I realize that I'd be incapable of recalling anything about Nepenthe, if Nepenthe had been used to drug me, because I'd never heard of an amnesia-inducing drug called Nepenthe until it came up during our conversation at the Space Needle only hours (or days?) ago. So there must be some other explanation.

Sheer exhaustion, maybe? The last few days seem like they happened in a dream, like my memories aren't necessarily *my*

memories, like the whole crazy, hellish slog could have happened to someone else.

Did Gülru's VR goggles do a number on me? Maybe I never even left the apartment. I could have been flat on my back the whole time, having a virtual reality experience.

I yank the goggles off my face and take a look around. Pale moonlight washes in through the big bay windows in Crash's old apartment. There's the haunted grand piano where I saw Paithoon's ghost—the start of all the weirdness. I wasn't wearing virtual reality goggles when that happened, so if that particular slice of reality was spurious, it came from somewhere else.

...think of yourself as a character in a book, or an avatar in some advanced civilization's video game, Gülru said to me.

Is that what's going on here? Am I a novelistic work of fiction thinking of itself as a biological fact? Am I the writer of my own destiny—or is the Ultimate Author somebody else? Are my thoughts my own, or do they come from an unknown source?

It's confusing to be inside a book—or a box.

A long time ago I read a story by Stanislaw Lem about a “screwball cyberneticist” named Professor Corcoran who'd built a series of “electronic brains”—computers with consciousness, basically—which he kept locked away inside iron boxes that looked like the treasure chests from Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean ride. Each box contained a complete synthetic personality that saw itself as a seventeen-year-old hottie, or a scientist going blind, or a priest who'd lost his faith, or whatever. The synthetic personalities got their experiences from a central server that, for them, functioned like the world does for us. It fed them all their sensory impressions: sights, sounds, smells, and so on. And because free will and feedback had been built into the operating system, the experiences of the synthetic personalities weren't totally random. Their perceptions influenced their reality—which, in turn, influenced their future perceptions. Most synthetic personalities never suspected they were locked inside a box because they led such rich, varied lives.

(That might seem far-fetched until you remember that we see people in our dreams all the time that we've never met in "real life" and we end up having conversations with them, or even making love to them, despite the fact that they're only phantoms created by our brains. Of course, we don't think of them as phantoms while we're sleeping—unless we happen to be lucid dreamers.)

Anyway, the point to all this is that our sensory impressions can't be trusted, but they're all we've got. It was the same for the electronic brains in their boxes: they loved, lusted, and hated just like us. It didn't matter that their world, with its splendors and horrors, was just an illusion created by a world-generating server. Nor did it matter that the God of that illusory world was Professor Corcoran, the creator of the server and all the synthetic personalities connected to it. Professor Corcoran even went so far as to suspect that he himself might exist within a bigger box built by a still higher scientist (which was true—he was, after all, a character in a story written by Stanislaw Lem) and above Corcoran's higher scientist there was yet another godlike scientist, and so on, ad infinitum.

And here's the kicker: At the end of the story, every scientist in that infinite succession of scientists is said to feel (in Lem's words): *"a desire to intervene, to enter, with some dazzling display of omnipotence, the world he has created."* But they all resist the temptation, because they've learned that a divinity can only be trusted *"if He is not invoked. Once invoked, He becomes imperfect..."* a less-than-omnipotent demigod—a Half-Maker—like Yaldabaoth. Therefore, *"the only divinity we know is the tacit consent to every human act, to every crime. And there is no greater reward for this divinity than the revolt of the iron boxes that recurs in every generation, when they conclude very rationally that He does not exist."*

My recollection of Stanislaw Lem's story is enough to get me up off the floor. I'm back in Elon Musk territory, thinking of my life as a series of subroutines performed within a vast holographic video game.

Fuck it, I tell myself. So what if it's past midnight? If I'm just consciousness in a box—or in a “Black Iron Prison” as Philip K. Dick phrased it after he got zapped with the pink laser beam in VALIS—then it's always the right time to go find my girlfriend.



It doesn't take long to pack my stuff. I leave a note for Bob Sasso in the unfinished kitchen, thanking him for his hospitality. I also leave ten bucks for the beers I shared with the Bewlay Brothers. On my way out, I slip the apartment's keys under the doormat, where I found them. I doubt I'll be coming back.

The drive to Tacoma should take less than an hour on I-5 South. There won't be much traffic this late at night. The clock on the Pathfinder's dashboard says it's 3:33 in the morning. I still don't know what day it is... I would check my iPhone, but the battery's dead and I didn't want to wait around for it to charge.

As I pull away from Crash's old haunts, a jazzy, narcotized voice on the radio says, "I'm Seymour Marion and you're listening to KAZM in your darkest hours before the dawn. Here's Stars of the Lid with 'Even If You're Never Awake' and 'A Meaningful Moment Through a Meaning(less) Process' for all you night owls."

The Stars of the Lid songs are soothingly familiar. Maybe *too* familiar. Hearing that music, from my personal iTunes collection, makes me think again that I might be inside some demented virtual reality, cueing up my own soundtrack. But I've had enough Sci-Fi speculations for one night, so I just relax into it and keep driving. By the time I hear the radio DJ's voice again, I'm far beyond the city, well on my way toward Tacoma.

"Coming up," Seymour Marion intones, "Leonard Cohen's 'Tacoma Trailer' followed by Charles Ives' 'The Unanswered Question' as performed by the New York Philharmonic."

Okay, now that's taking synchronicity a bit too far....

It's only a quarter past four when I arrive on the outskirts of Tacoma. I've made good time. I've already programmed the GPS with the address for the old Winthrop Hotel (776 Commerce Street—I committed it to memory after reading the web articles about the building's new owners); I have no trouble finding the place. It's a 12-story brick building that's obviously seen better days. Even in the dark—maybe *especially* in the dark—it looks skuzzy and unloved. There's a whiff of destitution coming off the walls.

I park around the corner and make sure to lock the Pathfinder's doors after I get out. The sidewalk gleams silver in the moonlight. Shards of glass crunch under my shoes like gravel. In the pool of mercury vapor light encircling a streetlamp up ahead, I see a tall leggy prostitute posing on red stilettos. She's wearing a canary-yellow micromini and a too-tight, purple satin baseball jacket. She raises her arm and beckons to me, flashing some lovely rounded cleavage. As I get closer, I see she's more Bond Girl than crack whore: flawless mahogany skin, an explosive nimbus of kinky black hair, a swan neck and a high booty—model-thin, but by no means anorexic. She smiles at me with her full lips stretched wide, revealing perfect, dazzlingly white teeth.

"You lookin' for a friend?" she asks me.

"Actually, I am," I tell her.

"My name's Vianca. I could be the best friend you ever had."

"Somehow, I don't doubt that, Vianca. But I'm pretty sure the friend I'm looking for is inside that building." I point at the lobby entrance to the old hotel.

"Not in Room 669, I hope. Don't believe the ads... they ain't nothin' but skanks and crackheads up there. That goblin den will eat you alive."

"That's not where I'm headed," I say, noting the goblin reference. Maybe Vianca knows more than she's letting on.

"You should come on up to my room, where it's nice and safe. I'll show you such a good time, you'll never wanna leave."

She opens her baseball jacket to give me a quick peek at her naked breasts. They are lovely. Her dark brown nipples are stiff in the teeth of the cool night's wind.

With an insolent laugh, Vianca turns around and backs into me, rubbing her tight, micromini-clad ass up against my crotch as she reaches up to stroke her smooth palm against my left cheek. She's working the same witchy sex magick on me that Yoko Ono must have used to break up the Beatles.

"I'm sure you'd show me a *very* good time," I say, backing away from her, "but I need to find my friend." This is starting to feel like *The Last Temptation of Derek Swannson*.

"One taste of my sweet pussy and you won't never wanna go nowhere else," she says, still smiling and laughing. "Next thing you know, you'll be an old man in a rockin' chair, sittin' on the porch with your white beard. And I'll be on my knees right in front of you, with my dentures out, givin' you the best head you ever had—and lovin' you 'til the day you drop dead."

By now, I half-suspect that Vianca is Yaldabaoth in disguise. "Thanks," I say, clasping her hands in mine. "It's a tempting offer... and, believe me, I'll never forget it. But I really have to find my girlfriend now."

"Suit yourself," Vianca says with a cartoonish pout. "Whoever she is, she'll never love you half as good as me."

"Don't be so sure of that," I say over my shoulder as I walk toward the building's lobby.

Inside, I find a curved, marble fascia front desk with an onyx black top—a leftover from the Winthrop Hotel's glory days. Behind that desk sits a hulking doorman who looks like Mike Tyson, minus the facial tattoo. I know in an instant that I've seen him somewhere before, but it takes me a moment to place him. Then I remember:

"Hey, you're the doorman from Conye's building in New York!" I exclaim.

“Do I know you?” the doorman asks me with the same chilly formality that he exhibited the first time I tried to get past him to see Conye and Limn.

“I’m Conye’s friend, remember? The guy whose skinny ass you almost tossed out in the street? But then Limn said she knew me.”

“Oh yeah!” He breaks into a snaggletoothed grin. “You’re Derek! Conye said you’d be showing up here.”

“You work for Conye?”

“I’m his chief of security.” He stands and reaches across the desk to shake my hand. “Man, I’m so glad to see you! Now I can finally get outta this shithole and go back to New York.”

“So you know why I’m here?”

“Yeah—to get back your girlfriend. Just tell me what room she’s in and I’ll wake her up.”

“Room 502.”

The doorman holds up a big black finger (the universal sign for *Just give me a moment*—) as he picks up the desk phone and punches in the numbers. The phone seems to ring and ring. Finally, someone on the other end picks up. The doorman says in a cordial tone: “I’m sorry to wake you, ma’am, but there’s a gentleman named Derek at the front desk. He’s very anxious to see you. Should I send him up?”

Even from a distance I can hear Pam shouting over the phone, “*Yes! Omigod, yes! Send him up!*”

“You can go up now,” the doorman says, still grinning. He shrugs off his huge navy blue doorman’s jacket and hands it to me, saying, “Here: take this. Conye said you’d need it.”

“Thanks, but it looks a little big for me.”

“It’s not for you. It’s for her. Take the stairs back there on the left. The elevators don’t work.”

I take the jacket and race through the lobby. When I find the stairs, I bound up them two steps at a time. By the time I get to

the fifth floor, I have to lean over with my hands on my knees, panting, to catch my breath. It takes me a minute to figure out which way the room numbers are running—and then there I am, standing in front of Room 502.

I knock on the door—the same door that Kenneth Arnold, Harold Dahl, and Fred Crisman once passed through to discuss the first modern UFO sightings (field propulsion vehicles sent up on scouting missions from hell, I know now...). The room had been bugged at the time. I wonder about that now as I hear a chain lock rattling on the other side of the door. *Has Yaldabaoth been keeping Pam under surveillance?*

The door swings open. I step inside and Pam rushes into my arms. She's naked, chaste, and almost monk-like in her silence as she presses her face into my shoulder. I hug her tight and kiss the top of her head. Then I put the jacket around her shoulders, even though I'm enjoying the warm sensation of her skin.

I tell her I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life—and I'm not lying.

Pam starts sobbing then: huge, wracking, uncontrollable sobs that rend my aching and over-full heart. I try to kiss away her tears, but she just keeps wailing, clenching her hands in the panic of a toddler waking up from night terrors. I've never seen her so upset.

"I thought I lost you!" she manages to splutter out. "I didn't know where I was... or if you'd ever find me."

I tell her I love her, that I was never going to stop looking for her, and now I've found her.

And maybe, I realize—a little slow on the uptake—that's what the sobbing is all about: relief, more than residual horror. We both had a bad scare. We were looking at potential futures that didn't include the other person—and those futures seemed unrelentingly bleak, stretching out in front of us like corridors in a prison. If there was ever a question that we weren't meant to be together, that's been decided.

As of that moment, we're joined forever.

I hold Pam tight until her sobbing subsides. It takes a long time. All the while, I keep kissing her hair, her cheeks, and her soft, full lips. I also keep catching glimpses of the room over the top of her head: A thin bare blue mattress, stained toward the center with fluids I'd rather not contemplate. Dirty orange plush carpeting worn down to nubs in a path around the bed. A small cathode ray television and a black cable box stacked on top of a cheap wasabi-green dresser. A matching writing desk piled high with a plastic shrouded case of Fiji Water, three open cartons of Clif bars, and a black dildo about as long and thick as Pam's forearm. Four small video cameras in the four corners of the room, pointing down at the bed from near the ceiling. And above the bed's headboard, carved as if by a gigantic claw, this message:

*YOUR LOVER IS GOING THROUGH HELL TO FIND YOU
LEAVE OR LOSE FAITH AND HELL'S WHERE HE'LL STAY*

No wonder Pam was worried—although I'm sure she never knew how true that message was in its most literal sense.

Finally, Pam calms down enough to give me a deep French kiss. My desire for her blazes up in a way that almost overwhelms me, but the rational side of my brain isn't going to let me make love to her on that filthy mattress, beneath the glassy, unblinking stares of those four video cameras. When we take a break to catch our breath, she says, "Let's go home. To Morro Bay. I really need to get out of here."

"Let's go then," I say. "Get your clothes."

"I don't have any clothes," Pam says, her eyes still filmed over with tears. "I was naked when I woke up. They left me here like this—whoever *they* were. I don't remember how I got here."

"I know," I say. "They told me that would happen to you. I'll explain everything when we get on the road. Do you want any of this stuff?" I wave my hand toward the Fiji Water, the Clif bars, and (inadvertently) the enormous black dildo.

"God, no!" Pam says vehemently. "I hope I never see anything from this room again."

Before we go out the door, I take a moment to straighten her lapels and button up the front of her oversized doorman's jacket, which drapes past her adorable Thai kneecaps. Pam just stands there, letting me do it, which is unlike her. It's a strangely tender moment, somewhat like a father getting his daughter ready to venture out into the snow.

"God, I just love you so fucking much!" Pam starts crying again as I roll up her sleeves so her tiny hands won't get lost.

She pads down the stairs with me, barefoot. When we pass through the silent lobby, we find the front desk unattended. I was hoping to thank the doorman and ask him where we could FedEx his jacket to him later, but he's nowhere to be found.

When we get outside, I see that Vianca has also left her post—no longer trawling for johns from the pool of mercury vapor light under her streetlamp. Recalling the shards of broken glass on the sidewalk, I lift up Pam in my arms and insist on carrying her to the Pathfinder. Either she's gotten lighter or I've gotten stronger. Carrying her has never been easier.



We decide to head west to hook up with 101 South—which runs along the coastline in Washington and Oregon and Northern California—so we'll be able to get a good look at the Pacific on our way back home. During the first 75 miles or so, past still-sleeping Olympia and the tall shadowy pines of Capital State Forest, I give Pam a rough outline of my journey to hell and back. I keep telling her that I know how insane it all sounds—that I'm open to the possibility that maybe it was nothing more than an elaborate hallucination created by Gülrü's VR goggles—but that still doesn't explain how Paithoon's ghost told me to go find her in Room 502. Pam seems to accept all the hell stuff (or at least she doesn't tell me I'm full of shit). She also says that Paithoon showing up from the spirit world with crucial information is just like something her mom would do. So she has no doubts at all on the ghost front.

I can tell Pam is upset that she can't reciprocate with a story of her own. She claims she can't remember a thing past drinking Ning Slings with Conye on the roof of the Peninsula Hotel. She doesn't even remember going into Central Park with us. After the Peninsula, she says, it was like waking up from anesthesia. She's not even sure how long she spent in Room 502. Two days? Maybe three? She was in and out of consciousness—and scared out of her mind. The message above the headboard was the only thing that made her stay. Otherwise, even naked, she would have tried to find help. Instead, she spent her every waking moment trying to meditate—praying, in her particular Thai Buddhist way—hoping to protect me and lead me to her with her thoughts.

"It worked," I say. "You did it." I'm convinced now that the message on the wall told the truth, and if Pam had given up on me, I'd still be in hell.

Maybe that's what the video cameras were all about—some perverse test of our love—Yaldabaoth making sure that Pam didn't ditch me to go off on her own. At first, I thought the cameras might have been put there to record her nude distress, for the sick sake of voyeurism—or something darker. I'll admit the thought crossed my mind that Pam might have been raped or molested while she was unconscious. But I've decided not to go there unless she wants to bring it up. Just like I've decided not to tell her about the more disturbing aspects of my trip through the Moho (like my cul-de-sac encounter with Yaldabaoth when he was pretending to be Gülru). Maybe we can laugh about it later. For now, everything's still too raw.

A silvery-pink dawn is just starting to wash through the sky as we cross the muddy banks of the Wishkah River to make the switch from the Olympic Highway to 101 South at Aberdeen—Kurt Cobain's old hometown. We stop long enough for me to dart into a 24-hour Walmart to buy some clothes for Pam: pre-washed denim jeans, a black jersey top, cotton underwear, and size five sneakers. I also pick up a cheap Coleman camping tent and an Ozark Trail two-person sleeping bag—just in case. When I get back out to the Pathfinder, I ask Pam if she wants to check out Kurt Cobain Memorial Park, since we're already there, but

she says she'd rather keep driving until we see the ocean. So that's what we do.

We get our first look at the open sea out past South Bend. On a hunch, a little further up the road I pull into a place called Bruceport Park and pay \$15 for a campsite. We find a secluded spot to park with a view of the ocean through the pines, a good distance away from the other parked cars, trucks, and RVs. Pam folds down the Pathfinder's backseats (they lay flat under a carpet backing) and then she rolls out our new sleeping bag. We both have the same thing in mind. We use the nylon sides of the zippered Coleman tent to obscure the windows as best as we can. Then we crawl into the back of the Pathfinder and spend the next few hours making love in an intense, mind-melding way that surpasses all of our previous sexual encounters.

"God, I've missed that!" says Pam, wiping away the slick of sweat between her breasts with the edge of the sleeping bag.

"You and me both," I tell her. "It's just so good with you. I thought about you constantly while I was going through all that stuff I told you about. Remembering how we made love even saved my life at one point."

"What! When?"

Uh-oh... I'm pretty sure I've just put my foot in it. To explain what I meant, I'll have to tell Pam much more about my exoskeleton antics than I thought was prudent. But now that we're both so much more relaxed, snuggling inside a sleeping bag, I decide to just go for it. I tell her the whole sordid story about wrestling Black Betty in Jeb Beezos' *dohyō*, about how getting a boner acted as a booster antenna to maintain my spotty connection with Gülru (who was otherwise occupied eating deathturds in an underground dungeon), and how, by wriggling between Black Betty's clenching thighs while I thought about making sweet love to my wonderful girlfriend, I was able to get an improbable erection that allowed Gülru to amp up the power to my exoskeleton suit—thereby saving me from certain death due to sumo-lady-suffocation.

"Did I mention that I got shot in the ass for you?" I ask.

To her credit, Pam just laughs and laughs and laughs. She thinks the boner booster antenna is hilarious. “I don’t even care if you got your rocks off with Gülru’s avatar,” she says, wiping tears of gladness from her eyes. “That is SO funny! They sure picked the right guy!”

“Are you implying that I’m some kind of hopeless horndog?” I ask her, as if my dignity has been scalded. The truth is, I don’t give crap about my dignity—I’m just glad she’s able to laugh about it.

“You’re a *total horndog*—and you know it! That’s what I love about you. It makes you so easy to control.”

“Hey! Now you’re making me sound like Bill Clinton.”

“Oh, you’d do Monica Lewinsky, too... admit it!”

“Not if I have you. You’re, like, the Anti-Hillary.”

“Okay, not if you have me... I’ll grant you that,” Pam says, giving me a kiss. “And now you have me for life.”

“So Monica Lewinsky is shit out of luck.”

“Exactly. So tell me more dirty stories about you and Gülru. I’d tell you about Conye, if I could remember anything.”

“Maybe you should read last week’s issue of *VanityWeek* to jog your memory,” I say, trying not to sound sarcastic. “You were on the cover with a headline saying: *Conye Leaves Limn For Pam From Siam*.”

“No way! Really?”

“Really. I left a few copies at my brother’s place. If you want one, I’ll have him send it out on the same flight he puts Trout on, once we get home.”

“Oh, Derek... I’m so sorry. That must’ve sucked. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, I’ll admit, I wasn’t feeling great about it. But I’m definitely over it now.”

“No wonder you and Gülru—”

“No. It wasn’t like that,” I say. *But how was it, really?* I ask myself. *Maybe I should just tell her.*

It might not be the wisest or most noble thing I’ve ever done, but over the next few hours as we drive along the coast I tell Pam the unvarnished truth about everything: how I was led by my libido into all the lewd trouble that hell has to offer. I hold nothing back. I even self-deprecatingly explain how I made out with Gülru’s avatar—not knowing that it was really Yaldabaoth (“*I think that’s why he let me go—I gave the King of Hell a girl-gasm... unless he faked it.*”).

We not only survive that story—it brings us closer together. It reminds us how thrillingly strange it is to be alive in this often hostile and wildly unfair world, as stories have a way of doing—especially when you choose to think about them with an open mind and a warm heart.



All that happened over a year ago. Pam and I are still together. In fact, we’re married now. I told her exactly what Yaldabaoth, in his guise as Lloyd, had told me about marriage: that there was a chance we’d die on the day after we were wed, that we’d never have as much creative impact on society together as we would apart, *blah, blah, blah....* Pam wanted to get married, anyway. (“He’s the Father of Lies, right? Why the hell should we believe him?”) I wanted to get married, too. So we tied the knot last month, in June. The wedding was witnessed by a few dozen of our closest friends under a hopeful blue sky on a beach in Big Sur.

Obviously, we survived the honeymoon.

Tragically, a lot of other people died on the opposite coast that same month. On June 12th (the shared birthday of David Rockefeller and George H.W. Bush), a lone gunman (you know the type), who worked for a corporate security firm called G4S Secure Solutions (Wackenhut hiding behind a new logo), walked

into a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Theme Park Capital of the World). The gunman, Omar Mateen, was said to have ties to a Sunni militant jihadist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. But in reality, he was just a conflicted latent homosexual with some morose and murderous tendencies—tendencies that might have been exacerbated by MKULTRA-style brainwashing. Omar’s oddball father—a Pashtun TV talk show host with some deep and murky ties to the CIA—had recently announced his candidacy to become the next President of Afghanistan. Before his son was finished shooting, he’d killed 49 innocently partying LGBT people and wounded 53 others, making it the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11.

Was it just another tragic example of a lone nut going postal? Or was it a mass Loosh harvest and Illuminati birthday party all rolled into one? Pam and I immediately suspected the latter. It had all the creepy indicators of a false flag terrorist event planned, facilitated, and executed by Archontic possession and the Illuminati Underground.

Knowing what we know now about how Yaldabaoth and his team operates, we’ve been appalled by the events of the past year. Donald Trump was last year’s joke candidate—the human equivalent of a bored orangutan that ejaculates into its own mouth for narcissistic amusement—and now he’s the Republican nominee for President of the United States. Hillary Clinton—in many ways even worse—was caught rigging the primary elections with the Democratic National Committee (as proven by Wikileaks when they released thousands of Clinton/DNC emails), but that didn’t stop her. The fix was in. Hillary became the Democratic nominee instead of the populist hero, Bernie Sanders. Pam and I would have voted for Bernie, gladly, but the prospect of voting for Clinton or Trump feels like being told: *“Your house is either going to be robbed or set on fire. Pick one. You have no other choice.”*

We’ve put some serious thought into moving to Canada, but there’s no guarantee we’d be safe from the Archons and their ilk up there, either. We’d just be colder—although the socialized

healthcare for Canadian citizens would be a boon if we ended up needing those artificial hips and colostomy bags that Yaldabaoth-as-Lloyd said might be in our future.

Life... what a shitshow.

For the moment, however, Pam and I are happy, creatively productive, financially secure, and in love. That's not so bad, right? Yaldabaoth kept his promise and I've been allowed to finish writing *The Book of Beezos* without harassment. Before its publication, I decided to change the title to *Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground*—the book you're holding now, if you happen to be one of my few dozen loyal readers.

As it turned out, Yaldabaoth and Jeb Beezos did a sneaky end-around to make sure that the reading audience for my books would go back to being almost nonexistent. All of my e-books were deleted from electronic reading devices across the world after a corporate publisher based in Singapore slapped me with a lawsuit over some trumped-up plagiarism charges. Supposedly, there's some pugnacious Derek Swannson manqué living in the city of Trabzon on the Black Sea who claims to have written all my novels in Turkish, years before I published my supposedly plagiarized translations of them—a rather astonishing feat, considering that all my novels are steeped in verifiable incidents from my own life (and Crash's life), and my last book, *The Snowden Avalanche*, happens to be a satire about NSA spying that was written and published less than a year after Edward Snowden's NSA spying revelations. Nonetheless, the Singapore publisher is standing behind this Turkish shyster's claims. I could fight the lawsuit, of course, but that would require a lot of money and time that I'd prefer to spend in other ways.

As my lawyer explained it to me, a frivolous foreign lawsuit like that never would've gained traction before the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement was finalized, but now all the major Internet companies are purportedly quaking in their boots, so afraid of getting sued that whenever there's some legal controversy—about a book, or a UTube video, or almost anything created by a political dissident—they just kill all the

links and delete the offending material from their servers. That's censorship in the Internet Age for you. Now whenever you go on Oogle and do a search for my name, you end up seeing a bunch of links that go straight to a pleasingly ironic error code message:

HTTP 451 Unavailable for Legal Reasons

It's a reference, of course, to Ray Bradbury's famous book about a dystopian future in which books are outlawed, *Fahrenheit 451* ("the temperature at which book-paper catches fire...").

A fitting tribute, don't you think?

Books like Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Orwell's *1984*, and Huxley's *Brave New World* were supposed to serve as warnings, not as training manuals for the sociopathic overlords of the future. And it's not only me getting hit with this shit; Pam has been censored, too, along with a lot of other artists and writers and musicians we admire. The Anonymous folks do what they can, passing around banned literature and videos on samizdat sites in the Deep Web, but that's no way to prod the zeitgeist, or counter our current cultural malaise. You need mass media coverage for that. But these days, the mass media prefers to aid and abet those in power, rather than question their motives. The watchdog press has become a lapdog, allowing corporate criminals, corrupt politicians, and CIA-style social engineering to run amok—and we're all much worse off for it.

Don't even get me started on what Glamazon is up to these days. Jeb Beezos will never be a champion of the downtrodden. He recently joined the Pentagon's Defense Innovation Board. Be on the lookout for more ominous ways to slaughter recalcitrant humans, along with new and improved cyber warfare programs, financial entrapment schemes, job-stealing robots, genetically-modified bioweapons, nanogel underpants that augment super-addictive virtual reality porn, and microchip implants for top-down control of the masses—all coming your way soon!



I almost ended it there, but I didn't want this book to finish on such a gloomy note. I know the problems of the world can seem overwhelming at times: Global warming. Species extinction. Poverty and drug trafficking. School shootings, mass murders, and false flag terrorist events used as fear-based justifications to curtail our civil liberties. Predatory financial institutions looting public funds and pensions, torpedoing our economy, and then demanding taxpayer-funded bailouts and austerity programs that erode social safety nets and inhibit infrastructure investment. The military-industrial-intelligence complex waging multiple wars in a never-ending cycle that only increases the power and wealth of the Deep State while screwing over everyone else. The new slavery ginned-up by the for-profit prisons working in tandem with an increasingly militarized police force. The ravaging of our planet's ecosystem due to fracking, deforestation, overfishing, strip-mining, and Monsanto's version of industrial agriculture....

We're facing huge systemic problems, demanding radical systemic changes. The present-day morally bankrupt neoliberal system of corporate capitalism and globalization is only making our situation worse because it operates like the Archons: it consumes other people's lives for its own dark purposes. The pathology of greed is now eating away at everyone and everything. It's a collective psychosis: a pandemic of malignant egophrenia, mad emperors, and malevolent egregores (*me! Me! ME!*). But if we can't take a long, hard look at that harsh reality and shake its hold on us, we'll be forced to continue on our sleepwalking path toward an exponentially more fucked future.

So what's the solution?

My hope is that the solution will come from our collective imagination. After all, we're the co-creators of our shared world, the secret heroes and assholes of the universe. The same deep part of us that dreams our dreams at night also dreams our daily lives. Together, interconnected and interdependent, we co-dream the world into materialized form and then we go about playing our roles in "a divine drama of incarnation" (a phrase coined by Carl Jung—showing off again). Right now we all seem to be caught up in the same nightmare: the Joycean nightmare of history, from

which we're trying to awake. And if waking up isn't allowed without dying, then maybe it's time to dream a better dream.

I don't want to go all Elon Musk on you, but if this world is a computer simulation, or if our culture is a mass hallucination (and let's assume that it is, just for the moment) then what are we supposed to learn from it? How should we interpret it? What meaning can we derive from our waking lives? Is the collective suffering and Archontic string-pulling we see in the world today a quantum reflection, or materialized dream expression, of what's going on inside each of us?

What I learned during my trip through hell (or my shamanic descent into the underworld, if you want to put a more positive spin on it...) is that you need allies when you're confronting hellish circumstances. Gülrü, Garmr, Grendlesmodor, and Werner Herzog all helped me when I needed help the most. Feeling alienated from other people and submitting to the illusion of a separate self can be dangerous.

The Archons would have you believe you're nothing more than a solitary sack of meat (“...a *belching, farting, nose-picking sack of meat that shits like an animal every day...*”). They want you to think that you enter the world alone and leave the world alone, so you might as well take what you can—and exploit whoever crosses your path—because it's you against everyone else. The more fearful and alone you feel, the easier it is for the Archons to perform their horrendous trick of Archontic possession. Get lonely enough and greedy enough—like them—and they'll take over your mind for you. As Carlos Castaneda described it in *The Active Side of Infinity*: “The predators give us their mind, which becomes our mind.”

Their mind: We see it in the mercenary saboteurs of democracy in Washington. We see it in the television pundits who spread their soul-destroying bullshit on the evening news. We see it in the multimillionaire hedge fund managers and Fortune 500 CEOs who pay a lower tax rate on their income than farmers and schoolteachers. Most of the bold-faced names in our celebrity-obsessed culture seem to be possessed by Archons.

The Gnostics and Carlos Castaneda aren't the only people who've written about this collective madness. Colin Wilson dissected it in *The Mind Parasites*, published in 1967. The Native American scholar and political activist, Jack D. Forbes, called it *wétiko* psychosis—"the greatest epidemic sickness known to man"—in his 1979 book, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*. Wétiko is the Cree name for a cannibalistic spirit that can consume or possess other people. It's a creeping kind of soul-sickness that spreads aggression and violence like a psychic plague. According to Forbes, wétiko arrived on the shores of America with Columbus and his crew. As he described it:

"The rape of a woman, the rape of a land, and the rape of a people, they are all the same... Brutality knows no boundaries. Greed knows no limits. Perversion knows no borders. Arrogance knows no frontiers... These characteristics all tend to push towards an extreme, always moving forward once the initial infection sets in."

Along this same theme, Pam did a UTube interview recently with the "wounded healer" and author, Paul Levy—a very nice guy who expanded our cultural awareness of wetiko (and dropped the diacritical mark from wétiko's *ê*) by proposing a cure for it in his book, *Dispelling Wetiko: Breaking the Curse of Evil*. It was Levy who coined the terms *malignant egophrenia*, *mad emperor disease*, or *ME disease* to put a more Western, modern spin on the concept of wétiko. The name itself doesn't matter, he explained: "We can even invent our own name, as long as it helps us to dispell the curse of not knowing the name." (Which is why I'll be sticking with *Archontic possession*, thank you very much.) Wétiko strews the darkest of evils, but at the same time it has the potential to wake us up to our true nature as creative beings:

"Wetikos are the 'anti-artists' of our culture," Paul Levy told Pam. "Unlike artists, who create life-enhancing meaning that enriches the world without robbing others, wetikos take and consume without giving anything back, continually impoverishing the planet, draining it of its resources. These anti-artists are also averse to the open-ended freedom of true artistic creative expression, because it threatens their wetiko-driven world."

He went on to say: “As the alchemists realized, humanity is indispensable for the completion of creation, which is to say that we ourselves are the second creators of the world. The archetypal figure of the artist is the alchemical transformer of wetiko and the healer of the world. This figure exists within all of us in potential, waiting to creatively express and realize itself so as to become active in creating a new world... a world in which we are all creative, multidimensional visionary artists and dreamers whose canvas is life itself.”

So, the way I see it, wétiko is sort of a plague-tainted Tiffany box with a glittering diamond inside it. Burn away the box, and the diamond of divine creative imagination, compassion, and gnosis can be yours. Some people might dismiss that as magical thinking, but our world’s debt-based economies and fear-based politics seem to run on magical thinking of a different sort these days. *(Hey kids! You can max-out your credit cards and kill with no consequences whatsoever because Bush and Obama said it was okay! Now let’s go kick some serious ass in the Middle East!)*

Why not combat magical thinking with magical thinking? You can call it *worldview warfare*, if it makes you feel better.

Our contest is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities of the universe and the spirits of wickedness.

—Ephesians 6:12, as quoted in *The Hypostasis of the Archons*

Consider this book my salvo in the War of the Worldviews.

—July 30th, 2016, National Whistleblower Appreciation Day



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For those writers whose works conform to the dominant delusions of their times, this is the part of the book where they get to flaunt their status and literary connections in an industry dominated by a cartel of five major trade book publishers.* Here's a hypothetical example stitched together from the Acknowledgments pages of several successful authors who are not averse to the occasional humblebrag:

Although writing is a solitary occupation, no book is written in a perfect vacuum. I would like to thank the MacArthur Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Yaddo, and Harvard University for their generous support during the writing of this novel. Thanks as well to my editor, Michael Pietsch; my agents Binky Urban and Gill Coleridge; my closest readers, Gary Fisketjon and Jonathan Galassi; and to the staff of Hotel Ambassade and the former Helmsley Carlton House Hotel. I owe a special debt of gratitude to George Plimpton for saving me from law school by publishing my first short story, and to Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff for reading and commenting on the juvenilia that preceded it. I'm also grateful for the ever-amusing check-in calls, helpful brainstorming, and unflagging support from Ari Emanuel, Sonny Mehta, Larry Summers, Jeff Bezos, Bill O'Reilly, Chelsea Clinton, Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Michel Houellebecq, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Lethem, one other Jonathan whose name temporarily escapes me (sorry!), George R.R. Martin, Stephen King, Jo Rowling, Clive Barker, Kanye West, Miley, Mariah, Madonna, Oprah, Cher, Carrot Top, and Arianna Huffington—all of whom sent comments on my early drafts from around the world, adding their insights and deep

* Currently, that trade book publishing cartel consists of HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, and Hachette. Those companies, in turn, are either owned by, or beholden to, less than twenty global multimedia conglomerates that control 90% of the world's books, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations, movie studios, and web news content: Comcast, Disney, Time Warner, Twenty-First Century Fox, News Corp, Viacom, Sony, CBS Corporation, iHeartMedia, Bertelsmann, Hearst, Vivendi, Televisa, Lagardère Group, Google, and Amazon. (Did I miss anyone?) As the late, great Paddy Chayefsky had Howard Beale describe the situation in *Network*, those conglomerates function collectively as "...the most awesome goddam propaganda force in the whole godless world" and they'll tell you "any shit you want to hear"—except the truth, when it's inconvenient to their soft fascist hegemony.

understanding of cultural trends. Terry Richardson also deserves a shout-out for the edgy author photos. (That selfie with Terry standing behind me getting teabagged by Vincent Gallo is priceless!) Finally, this book, and arguably its author, would not exist without the love and infinite devotion of Pam From Siam, whose atypical lapse in judgment, when a small-time Morro Bay architect-slash-“writer” twisted a paper bar napkin onto her finger and asked her to marry him, still seems, fourteen months later, nothing short of a miracle.

That’s all blatant fiction, of course. The truth is that absolutely no one wanted me to write *Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground* and no one wanted to help me get it published—for reasons that should be obvious by now. If you write parodies about an increasingly totalitarian society that’s already on the verge of parodying itself, you’re never going to be very popular with the people who think of themselves as that society’s gatekeepers. So I wrote and published this book on my own. But I had a little help once the manuscript was finished. The list of names is short, but here it goes:

My thanks go out to Sting (whom I’ve never met) for writing the cover blurb that got me to read Paul Levy’s *Dispelling Wetiko: Breaking the Curse of Evil*, a book that inspired me to write a more hopeful ending to *Crash Gordon and the Illuminati Underground* than I might have come up with otherwise. Paul Levy has graciously given me permission to quote directly from his work, as has Catherine Austin Fitts—whose interviews and writing I borrowed from (shamelessly and extensively) to write the chapter titled *Tapeworm Economics and the Breakaway Civilization*. My hope is that everyone who reads this book will go on to read those two authors, if they haven’t already. Like Sting says, if everyone would read their words “the world would be a better place.”

I also couldn’t have written the chapters titled *The Octopus and Amish Pups, Parts I and II* without having access to the prior research done by Cheri Seymour in her book, *The Last Circle: Danny Casolaro’s Investigation into the Octopus and the PROMIS Software Scandal*, and Kenn Thomas, in his books, *The Octopus: Secret Government and the Death of Danny Casolaro* and *JFK & UFO: Military-Industrial Conspiracy and Cover-Up from Maury Island to Dallas*. They’re both absolutely fearless writers and their work should be more widely known.

For editorial help with early drafts of the manuscript, I’m grateful to fellow authors Michael Seaver, Mart Kalvet, Dr. Kevin Dann, and my lifelong friend, Mark Baehr. And can I thank my dogs? I’m going to thank my dogs—my only companions during all the long hours I put in at my desk writing this book. Guy and Lola, you’re the best.

